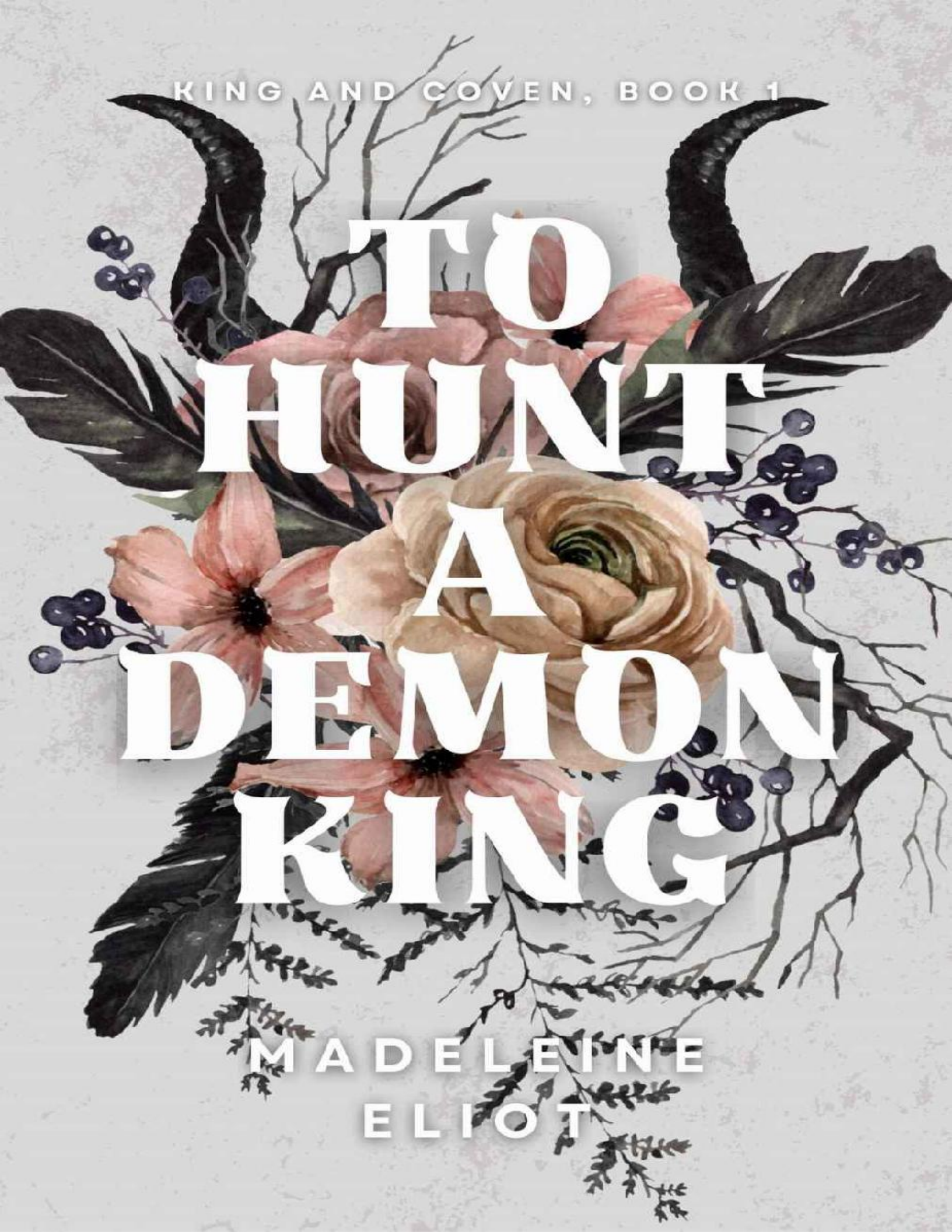




KING AND COVEN, BOOK 1

TO HUNT A DEMON KING

MADELEINE
ELIOT

To Hunt a Demon King

Madeleine Eliot



Madeleine Eliot

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To my hype girls, long may you hype!

*In the name of the Lady of the Moon,
and the Lord of Death and Resurrection.
In the name of the Mighty Ones of the Four Quarters,
the Kings of the Elements.
Blessed be this place, and this time,
and they who are now with us.*

"Dryghten" Blessing Prayer (Gardnerian)

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The World of King and Coven



Pronunciation Guide

Akela: Ah-KEE-lah

Beltane: BELL-tain

Carnon: KAR-non

Cerridwen: KARE-uh-dwen

Demon: DEE-mon

Daemon: DAY-mon

Elara: Ehh-LAR-uhh

Herne: HURN

Ostara: Oh-STAR-ah

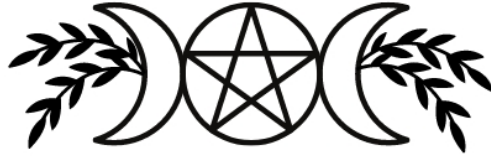
Oneiros: Oh-NEE-rowz

Samhain: SAH-when

The Wheel of Fortune

Part 1





Chapter 1

“Goddess curse me,” I growled, pulling the blackened pie from the oven as I coughed through the smoke that filled our tiny kitchen. I swear I had only left the thing in the oven for one minute too long, and somehow it was charred to a crisp.

This was the third pie I had burnt in as many days, and I fumed at my own inability to produce an edible pastry. How was it possible that I could cast a hundred different spells and perform every piece of magic I came across, but baking was beyond me?

“Maybe the fire was too hot,” said Mama consolingly, opening the window to let the smoke out, then leaning over my shoulder and grimacing at the blackened mess of a crust. “Or you left it longer than you thought.”

“I swear, I followed the instructions perfectly,” I replied, throwing my apron down in frustration and wiping my sweaty face, probably leaving even more streaks of flour on my freckled cheeks.

“Pie is complicated,” Mama said patiently, taking a knife and cutting away the blackened edges. “And what appears to be horrible at first glance may be wonderful underneath.” She gingerly removed the smoking crust, lifting the top to reveal golden peaches underneath. She beamed at me. “See?”

I rolled my eyes at Mama’s insistence on being positive, accepting the fork she handed me and nibbling on one of the cooked peaches from the filling. It was heaven and somehow not too hot under the blackened crust, but I was determined to be annoyed.

“Mmm,” Mama said, also biting into a steaming peach. “Delicious.”

“It’s not a real pie without a crust though,” I complained, contemplating the dissected pie with animosity. My birthday was in two days, and I was determined that this year, as I would finally reach what

witches considered maturity, I would make my own pie to celebrate. I was failing horribly.

“I am happy to make your birthday pie, my heart,” Mama said, patting my shoulder as she began to tidy the mess I’d made of the kitchen. “I don’t think I mastered baking until I was in my fourth or fifth decade. You’ll get there eventually.”

I sighed, frustration over the pie not my only source of annoyance this morning. I gathered the dishes and spoons and measuring cups, and joined her at the sink.

“I’m sure,” I said sarcastically, taking the clean bowl she handed me and drying it like we did every evening after supper. “Just like how I’ll make it to the Coven meetings someday.”

Mama stilled, her hand hovering in the air between the sink and the next dish before going to the black stone at her throat. She always wore the necklace, a black stone on a gold chain, wrapped in delicate threads of gold to hold it in place. It was a gift from my father, and she usually fiddled with it when she was uneasy.

She wouldn’t tell me about him, no matter how many times I asked, but I thought she must have loved him. I would often catch her looking sadly at me when I was a child as she played with the necklace. It was unusual for a witch to be so attached to her witchling’s human sire.

Witches did not marry, as mortal men were short-lived in comparison. Mortal men were needed for producing witchlings, as witches only bore daughters who would inherit their powers. The Crone and Coven declared that all mortals in the witchdom were required to live in the border villages near the woods, separate from the witches, but available for breeding. Love was almost never a factor in witch pairings, as long as the man had good looks and a strong disposition.

My thick, wavy, copper hair and freckles had certainly not come from him. I looked like I could be Mama’s younger sister, her warm brown eyes glowing with the same golden light that could be found in mine, her copper hair and freckles the twin to my own.

She was so different from my grandmother, who had thick, black hair and creamy pale skin, and eyes so icy they were devoid of any warmth. While I was pleased to be more like Mama in looks, I sometimes wished she was a little more like my grandmother in her beliefs about witchlings.

“You don’t need to attend Coven meetings to be a witch,” Mama said, for what seemed like the millionth time this year, returning her hand to the dishes. “You still have a month before it’s mandatory.”

I sighed. While most witches gained their Goddess-blessed gifts around puberty, it was traditional to wait until twenty-five to attend Coven meetings. This was the year we were no longer considered maidens of the Coven, but full adult witches. Many witchlings attended earlier if their mothers allowed it, but mine never had. She treated me more like a child than a fully grown adult.

Mama had come into her power at eight, one of the youngest in a century, and had quickly mastered all there was to know about witchcraft. But when her twenty-fifth birthday arrived, she refused a position of leadership in the Coven, much to my grandmother’s chagrin. It was one of the reasons we lived in a small cottage on the edge of town instead of the Crone’s manor.

“Grandmother will never take me seriously if I don’t attend,” I said, drying the dishes and piling them neatly on the counter. My grandmother had served as the Crone of the Coven for over a hundred years. She was a fierce and terrifying witch, and Mama and I seemed to be a source of intense disappointment for her.

“What a terrible loss that would be for us,” Mama said, adopting my sarcastic tone and giving me a wry smile. I wasn’t sure why Mama had refused Coven leadership, but I knew she didn’t get along with my grandmother. Grandmother was an ancient beast of a woman, so I wasn’t too torn up about it. I had tried to impress her as a child, and I think a part of me still wanted to, but I had long given up hope of receiving affection from her. Still, I didn’t understand why their disagreement should stop me from attending Coven meetings.

“I may as well go and live with the mortals,” I said irritably, contemplating missing yet another Coven meeting with dismay.

Mortals had no power and very few rights in the Coven. I suspected that some tried to leave our witchdom, but most died crossing the demon-cursed woods that surrounded the Witchlands. The fact that the Demon King also killed any mortal that entered his lands probably deterred the rest.

They might not be equal here, but at least they were safe from demons.

“If you did, my heart,” Mama said, using the pet name she had called me all of my life, “you would find that most mortals are kind and lovely. Some would envy such a life.” I scoffed, eliciting a frown from Mama as she fiddled with the necklace.

We finished the dishes in silence, Mama washing and I drying, as the smoke from the burned pie cleared in the breeze from the open window. It was spring, and the buzz of insects in the flower beds was its own special rhythm as we worked.

“There’s a Coven meeting tomorrow,” I said finally as Mama cleared the last of the measuring cups. “I’ll be a day away from my quarter century. Can I please attend?”

Mama grimaced. I was hoping that by this month’s meeting I would be able to stand beside Mama and the rest of the Coven, but it felt like a forlorn hope based on her face.

“My heart,” she sighed, placing the dry measuring cups in the drawer and looking out the small kitchen window.

“Can’t I please go?” I asked, turning a pleading look on Mama. I knew that she wanted to protect me from my grandmother, but I was desperate to prove myself as a member of the Coven. “I know every spell there is to know, and I’ve been helping you with potions for years. I can do this!”

“Elara,” she said more firmly.

“Please,” I begged, my hands clasped. “I will stay next to you the whole time, and I have the invocation spell memorized already. I won’t embarrass you, I swear.”

Mama sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. We had been having this argument for years, but her answer had never changed.

“I’m not worried about you embarrassing me, my heart,” she said, frowning at me. “I just don’t want you going until you absolutely have to.” I groaned, having heard this a hundred times before.

“You have all the time in the world to be part of the Coven,” Mama added, patting me gently on the shoulder. She turned to pack away the flour and butter on the kitchen table. “Let yourself be a witchling for one more meeting.”

Despite Mama’s reassurances, I had a strong suspicion that she would try to find a way to prevent me from attending next month as well. I was no longer a witchling, but she seemed adamantly against letting me prove myself. I knew she wanted to keep me away from my grandmother. Mama

made no secret about wanting me to have as little to do with her and the rest of the Coven as possible. But I had to believe there was more to it than just that.

A waving form at the garden gate caught my attention, and my best friend entered our little yard and skipped up the path. Pure mischief shone in her face.

“Elara!” Vera shouted from the gate. “I need you!”

“I’m coming!” I shouted back. I rolled my eyes at my friend as I picked up my apron from where I had thrown it and hung it more neatly on the hook by the stove.

“Elara—” said Mama, stepping toward me as I pulled on my boots. She hesitated, cupping my cheek.

“What is it, Mama?” I asked, trying to temper my frustration and annoyance. Despite our disagreement about my Coven membership, I loved Mama, and we rarely disagreed. She was always looking out for me and teaching me to hone my craft so that, when I did go out on my own, I would be ready. I didn’t have much to compare her with, secluded as we were from other witch families, but I was certain I had one of the best mothers in the witchdom.

I looked up at her. She was frowning, looking uncertain, as if trying to decide what to say next.

“What is it?” I asked again, taking her hands. They were rough from the hard work she did to keep our little cottage pristine, and to help the mortals with all manner of magic cures and tinctures.

“Nothing,” she said, her frown lifting into a sad smile. “I love you.”

I smiled, kissing her on the cheek.

The day was warm, so I left my cloak and met Vera with a smile. Her ebony curls shone in the afternoon sun, and she returned my smile as I took her arm to walk the paths in the woods around our cottage. I was glad of my boots, for the paths were muddy from recent rain. I doubted we would see travelers from the mortal village, which was a good ten miles away.

There were several small witch and mortal villages throughout the Witchlands, as well as Ostara, the capital city of the Witchlands where the Coven meetings were always held. The city was named for the celebration of the start of spring, and it was supposedly bustling with life and light and excitement. I had never been, but Vera often visited her aunt there and told me all about it. Mortals were forbidden from entering the city, and most

kept to their villages near the Bloodwood, which surrounded the entire witchdom. The demons had created it to punish the witches who had saved the mortals from their wicked magic, effectively trapping us all.

Mama had chosen to settle us in the middle of nowhere, to be as far from my grandmother as possible. Our little cottage was near the border of the Witchlands, with only the cursed Bloodwood protecting it from the Darklands to the east where the Demon King reigned. It was really more an illusion of distance for Mama, I thought. Travel by witch mirror meant that my grandmother could reach us anytime and anywhere, if she really wanted to.

Because of our distance from Ostara and any really sizable villages, there were few witches nearby. Vera and her mother were the only others for several miles. Being the only witches around was actually a Goddess-send. Mama never struggled to find work, always cooking up healing potions, poultices, and charms for the mortal families in the nearby village, who traveled hours to see her. She charged far less than she probably could, but we had never gone hungry, or without heat or clothing. When the villagers couldn't pay, Mama happily accepted trades or labor.

Vera's mother also had mortal customers, mostly farmers who had heard about her growing spells. She wasn't as blessed with the craft as Mama, but she preferred working for herself over working for wages in Ostara. Vera hated the isolation, though.

"There's nothing to do here," she whined regularly, the frequency of her complaints growing as she neared her maturity. I hadn't asked, for fear she would confirm it, but I was fairly sure she would move away to a larger town, or maybe even Ostara, as soon as she could. She had turned twenty-five only a week ago, and it was going to be terribly lonely without her, even if she was only a mirror away.

"You smell like smoke and peaches," Vera said, wrinkling her nose as she looked me over, swinging her basket to her other arm. "And you have flour on your nose. Another baking disaster?"

"More like a catastrophe," I said, rubbing my nose and hoping I had removed all of the flour. "Are you excited for the Coven meeting?"

"Yes, and no," Vera said, smiling a little sadly. "I wish you could come with me. You're going to be one day shy of turning twenty-five! It's silly that your Muh-maaaaaah won't let you." I grimaced as she exaggerated Mama's name.

“Yours didn’t let you attend until you were twenty-five either,” I pointed out. Vera’s mother was traditional like mine, and tomorrow night would be Vera’s first meeting. She was expected to cast a public invocation to claim her place as a Coven member, and we had been practicing it for months. I could tell she was nervous.

“I know,” she said, sighing. “But you’re practically the same age as me. It’s ridiculous you have to wait another month.”

“Alas,” I sighed jokingly, giving Vera’s arm a squeeze. I brushed my hair back irritably. It had a tendency to run amok, even when it was braided back, and tendrils kept escaping to attack my face. “Maybe I can practice my baking instead so I can impress the Coven with my pies next month.” Vera snorted.

“You’d better not,” she said, laughing. “You’ll poison everyone in the Coven.”

“Vera!”

Sebastian, son of one of the local farmers, waved as he jogged toward us. I grimaced. Sebastian was friendly enough, but I knew it was because witches had reputations of being loose, and his father’s nearby farm gave him an excuse to visit Vera often. Since witches didn’t marry, young men had nothing to fear from a night or two of pleasure with one of us.

Vera teased me mercilessly about my prudishness, telling me I should be enjoying the mortal boys that ventured this far out of their village instead of snubbing them. But I was uninterested in letting what was beneath my skirts become a conquest for brash young men. I rarely came across nice mortal boys who hadn’t met Vera first, anyway. She was like a ray of sunshine, always smiling and teasing and laughing, while I was more reserved. I just didn’t think it was worth it to put myself out there for what would probably be an awkward and disappointing romp, especially when I could take care of my needs just fine without a man fumbling over me.

“Elara,” Sebastian nodded politely, after greeting Vera with a kiss on the hand. “What brings you ladies out today?”

“Oh, just looking for something *fun* to do,” Vera said, smirking at Sebastian in a way that made him blush and me roll my eyes.

“I’m on my way to see your mother,” Sebastian said, face turning pink as he ran a calloused hand through his hair and looked hopefully down at Vera. “Maybe I’ll see you there in a bit?”

“Maybe,” Vera said, offering him a coy wink as we continued past him.

“I don’t understand why you like him,” I said, frowning over my shoulder at Sebastian. He was still standing on the road, grinning like an idiot. I rolled my eyes, giving Vera a scathing look. “Mortal men are only interested in what’s between your legs.”

“Not all mortal men,” Vera corrected, smiling at me mischievously. “Clearly someone caught your mother’s attention, so they can’t all be bad. Plus,” she added, poking me in the ribs gently with her elbow, “Sebastian is *very* attentive.”

I wrinkled my nose in distaste as Vera laughed.

“Someday, someone will catch your eye,” Vera warned, hopping over a patch of mud and turning into the field of wildflowers that led to our favorite pond. “And then you’ll be asking me for all of my advice.”

“Unlikely,” I declared, giving her a withering look. Mama had books on anatomy, and I had helped her deliver children. I understood how it all worked, and when I was ready to have a witchling, I might consider it. I just didn’t really see the appeal other than that. “Especially when we live so far from any of them.”

“Well, when you’re ready to actually have some fun for a change, we can go tour the villages together,” Vera said, waggling her eyebrows suggestively. “I’ll help you pick a good one.”

I frowned, but I didn’t tell Vera I had no intention of doing that any day soon.

We arrived at the little pond and sat in the shade of an oak tree. Vera began pulling things from her basket, including a crystal, a book of spells, and several bundles of sage, distracting me from the buzzing of insects and croaking of frogs in the waning afternoon light. I raised my brows at her expectantly.

“I hoped you would help me practice my invocation,” she said, somewhat sheepishly, as she continued to pull magical elements from her basket. “After all, a good witch should always be prepared.”

I smiled. The phrase was one that we commonly used when practicing spells.

All witch spells and charms required physical objects to channel the magic bestowed by the Goddess. Sometimes it was crystals or specific herbs burned, sometimes a pentagram drawn in chalk or the bones and

feathers of a creature. Most spells required a specific incantation or witch signs drawn in a specific sequence. This spell was relatively simple, but Vera had a terrible memory for spells of any kind.

She had once excitedly told me that demon magic didn't require any items or incantations, and that demons could simply will their magic into being. It sounded both highly convenient and highly dangerous. Mama had taught me when I was very young that all magic had a cost; a way to keep nature's balance intact. It required thought and preparation and a pure heart. While I was very good at the craft and could perform some strong spells, no witch could just will magic into being. Demon magic, cast without a cost or consequence, seemed unnatural and downright dangerous in comparison. With that kind of power, it was no wonder that demons were evil creatures seeking to take over all other lands.

"I'm dismal at remembering all the words," Vera said pleadingly, "and I need to perform it perfectly tomorrow night to be accepted as part of the Coven."

The invocation of the Goddess was a witch's first public spell, always cast at her first Coven meeting. It was a small magic, mostly just a prayer asking the Goddess for her blessing that left a subtle golden glow around the caster, which faded after a few hours, but the gathered witches would know if the magic wasn't performed correctly.

"Well, I'm all practiced up," I replied, shifting to sit up on my knees, "so I suppose we make a perfect pair."

We worked on the spell for a while, me reminding Vera of the words while she cast the magic. It was cruel, I thought, that the Goddess had blessed me with the memory and ability for spells and incantations, while Mama refused to let me attend the meetings.

"I'm going to stay in Ostara, after the meeting," Vera blurted out. We had practiced her invocation of the Goddess so many times that both of us could perform the spell from memory. I swallowed, feeling a tight ball in my chest. Suspecting this was coming didn't make it easier to hear.

"Where?" I asked, looking up at her expectantly. She was beautiful, with warm brown skin and black curls and high cheekbones for days, but right now her normally bright eyes were avoiding mine.

"At my aunt's," she said, finally looking up and frowning. "I'm sorry, I should have told you sooner."

“It’s okay,” I said, swallowing thickly. “I guessed you’d want to leave.”

“You could come with me,” she said, smiling faintly. “My aunt has room. You could find work at a shop or...” she trailed off, seeing my answer in my face.

“I can’t leave Mama,” I said. “I’m all she has.”

“Because she chooses not to see your grandmother,” Vera pointed out.

“You would too, if you knew my grandmother,” I said darkly, giving her a grim smile.

“Or live near other witches,” Vera added.

“The only other witch I care about is you,” I said, smiling sadly at my friend. Sure, we were friends of convenience, growing up as the only two witchlings near each other. But I still loved her, and she was the only other person I had besides Mama. “You’ll visit?”

“Of course,” Vera said, a true smile lighting her face now, “and you can come visit me! Think of the shops and the taverns and the concert halls we will be able to go to!” I nodded with a smile as Vera rambled about her plans to work for her aunt’s summoning business in Ostara until she figured out her ‘true calling.’ I enthusiastically agreed to visit after Beltane, which was only a week away, and usually a source of excitement so close to my birthday, but a dark pit opened in my stomach at the thought of losing my only friend.

“Don’t look so sad, Elara,” Vera said, clearly seeing through my false smile and taking my hands. She gave them a comforting squeeze. “I’ll only be a mirror away. We can see each other every day if we really want.” I nodded, squeezing her hands back as we rose and gathered the spellcasting elements back into Vera’s basket.

“The spell is cast,” I murmured, releasing the Goddess's magic back to her. A little popping noise and a puff of chalk told me I had successfully ended the spell. “Don’t forget to end the spell properly tomorrow night, Vera.”

“Oh, right,” she said, a little chagrined. “I always forget that part.”

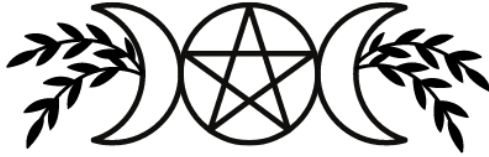
I tried to plaster a smile to my face as we walked back toward the path that connected our homes. Despite Vera’s assurances, I knew we wouldn’t see each other every day. Not anymore. But I didn’t want to tarnish Vera’s excitement with my melancholy, not when I knew how badly she wanted to do this.

“We meet again,” Sebastian said, waving as we headed back up the lane. He had clearly been waiting for some time, and he hopped down from the fence where he had been loitering. He fell into step beside Vera and gave her what he must believe to be his most dazzling smile. “Can I walk you home?”

Vera grinned and looked at me, her eyebrow raised in a question. I rolled my eyes.

“Go on,” I said, waving her off. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Love you,” she said, waving goodbye. She accepted Sebastian’s arm and skipped off with him. I had a feeling they would not be heading straight home.



Chapter 2

My forced smile fell away as soon as she was gone from my sight, and I frowned all the way home. Mama was waiting, stirring a large, steaming pot over the hearth. The tiny kitchen smelled like lamb and carrots, but I had no appetite, even for Mama's famous stew. She raised her brows in question when she saw me.

"Vera is staying in Ostara," I said, by way of explanation, "after the meeting tomorrow."

"Oh, my heart," she said, wrapping her arms around me and squeezing. "I'm sorry."

"I knew it was coming," I said, hugging her back. "But I hate it anyway."

"I know," Mama said, stepping back from me and holding me at arms length. "She can visit though?"

I nodded, forcing a smile, which made Mama's frown deepen. She always knew when I was lying.

"You know," she said, studying me carefully. "If all goes well, you could join her next month."

I smiled sadly at her.

"I couldn't leave you here," I said, taking her hand and squeezing.

"I have my reasons for keeping you here until you reach maturity, Elara," Mama said, cupping my face in her hands. "But I know sooner or later you will have to make your own way in the world," she added, giving me a sad smile. "You don't have to stay with me forever."

I furrowed my brows in thought. The problem was, I didn't really know what I wanted. All I had ever known was a life with Mama, and the idea of leaving that scared me. Despite her assurances of future freedom, she seemed intent on keeping me with her forever.

“If that’s true, then why can’t I go tomorrow night?” I asked, determined to get a straight answer from Mama.

“Elara...” she sighed.

“I know you want me to wait, and I know you and Grandmother don’t get along,” I said.

“To put it mildly,” she cut in with a scowl.

“But I’ll keep my distance, I swear,” I added. “Please, let me do the initiation with Vera.”

“Even if you want to keep your distance,” Mama said, turning back to the stew she had been cooking, “your grandmother will not.”

I knew she was right. Several times as a child, my grandmother had attempted to lure me from Mama with dolls or clothes or new books of magic, as long as I agreed to go and live with her. Eventually, Mama had forbidden her from coming to see us at all, threatening to take me to the Bloodwood to hide me from her.

“I don’t want her poisoning you with her beliefs,” Mama added, waving the stew spoon in emphasis. I grimaced.

When I was about four, Mama had finally agreed to let my grandmother visit me for the first time. She had looked at our little cottage with disgust and criticized Mama at great length, trying to get her to confess who my father was. Eventually, she had moved on to disparaging our closeness to a mortal village.

“Mortals were placed here by the Mother to serve witches,” Grandmother had declared, looking in horror at Mama’s collection of remedies she was making for the townsfolk. “Why in the name of the Goddess would you bless them with the craft?”

“Mortals were placed on this earth by the Goddess, just as the witches were,” Mama argued. “All creatures should be treated with respect, not just witches.” The argument escalated, and Mama finally sent my grandmother away.

“Why do witches not live with the mortals?” I asked later, my innocent brain unable to comprehend the truth of our world. Mama had sighed, putting down the brush she was using to try to tame my mass of coppery hair, and turned me to face her.

“Not everything in this world is fair, my heart,” she said. “Sometimes, we have to fight for what is right when we see that something is wrong. Your grandmother doesn’t see that yet.”

Now that I was older, I knew that my grandmother would never see it. It was one of the reasons Mama refused a position in the Coven and moved us so far away, and I agreed with Mama. I had no interest in forging a relationship with the woman who had terrified me so much as a child. Still, I didn't think that was enough of a reason to stop me from attending the Coven meeting tomorrow.

"Why else?" I pushed, taking the bowl of stew Mama handed me. I didn't really feel like eating anything, but I poked the lumps of meat with my spoon and made a show of trying. "There must be a better reason."

Mama sighed, and I truly expected her to change the subject.

"There is, my heart," she said, sounding suddenly exhausted.

"What is it?" I asked, looking up eagerly, my heart beating a little faster.

"I promise I'll tell you," Mama said. "On your birthday." I felt the excitement and hope that had buoyed in my chest deflate like an old rubber ball. "Now eat your stew."

I tried to keep myself busy the next day to stop from thinking about the meeting and Vera's initiation and the fact that Mama was keeping something from me. I spent the morning helping Mama with her potions and tinctures for the local village: setting up the casting elements, finding the correct colors of crystal, and drawing and redrawing pentagrams until she declared that there was nothing else for me to help with.

Vera said she was too busy getting ready for the meeting to go out with me, giving me an apologetic look when I knocked on her door. Her hair was mussed and her clothing askew, and I had a strong suspicion it was not because she had simply slept in. I bit my tongue, deciding not to comment on the fact that I had seen Sebastian riding past me back to the village on my way over.

I was admittedly annoyed with Vera, not because she had spent time with Sebastian instead of me, but that she had clearly been hiding it. I wandered rather aimlessly toward the Bloodwood, kicking the rocks beneath my boots and stewing in my frustration.

A growl startled me out of my gloom. I looked up to see that I had wandered near the border of the Bloodwood. The trees were gnarled and black here, and the sky took on a reddish tint the deeper one traveled, or so I had heard. I looked around for the source of the sound and froze as I caught sight of a gigantic wolf.

It stood on the edge of the Bloodwood, head tilted to the side as if it was studying me. It was brown and shaggy, and it looked like its head would reach my chest. Yellow eyes gleamed from the darkness, and it bared a set of very sharp teeth, as if preparing to attack.

My eyes widened in panic as I tried to remember if I knew anything about scaring off wolves. No, I did not. I lowered myself to the ground, hoping that if I seemed smaller and unthreatening, it would walk away. I said a little prayer of protection, since I didn't have any dill or lavender on hand to cast a proper protection spell, hoping the wolf would heed it. Half of magic was willpower and hope, after all.

The wolf prowled closer, yellow eyes trained on me, until it stood only a few feet away from me. It stared, making me feel a little disconcerted, as if I were the wild specimen, and it was studying me.

"Hello," I said tentatively, looking at the wolf. It didn't move, still staring at me and twitching an ear as if deciding what to do next. It didn't seem hungry, at least.

"Please don't eat me," I added in a whisper, saying an extra prayer that I wouldn't become lunch.

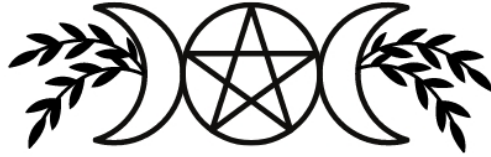
The wolf moved toward me, pressing its cold, wet nose to my forehead and sniffing. I stayed very still, worried that if I moved, it would decide I was prey.

After a moment the wolf pricked its ears and turned to look back at the forest. I didn't hear anything, but clearly the wolf did. It turned once more, looking wistfully at me before loping off into the Bloodwood. I breathed a sigh of relief, struggling to stand from my crouch. The wolf looked back again as it reached the edge of the Bloodwood, letting out a parting howl as it disappeared between the trees. I wasn't sure what to make of the encounter.

Wolves were seen as guides and guardians by witches, often heralding change or transformation. I felt neither transformed nor changed, but the experience had put me on edge.

I decided that I had probably had enough adventure for one day, so I turned to head home. Glancing back at the Bloodwood, I tried and failed to shake the feeling that something was still watching me from the shadows.

I hoped it was only the wolf.



Chapter 3

Mama was waiting for me when I returned to the cottage. She was dressed in her cloak, even though I knew she would be traveling directly into the Covenstead via her mirror. Meetings were always held in the Covenstead, but Mama always went in her cloak, wearing it like armor.

Most witches used mirrors, carved with specific symbols and activated with an incantation, to travel long distances. It was fairly simple magic as long as a witch had a clear destination in mind when she stepped through the mirror. Witches could travel between any mirrors in the Witchdom, but it was wisest to stick to known mirrors. Vera had told me once of a witch who had gotten so impossibly stuck inside a hand mirror, not realizing it's size, that she had lived there the rest of her days. I had no idea if that was true, but it was a fair cautionary tale.

"I'll go and get this over with," Mama said as she prepared to leave, giving my shoulder a squeeze as she strode toward the floor length mirror in her bedroom. Its wooden frame was worn and cracked, the witch signs around its frame faded until they were almost unrecognizable, but it worked just fine. She had repeatedly refused to let my grandmother replace it, arguing that there was no point in placing a gilded mirror in our modest cottage.

Mama spoke the words of the spell to travel, shooting me one last smile before stepping through the glass, which had turned to a silvery liquid for traveling.

I sighed, watching her disappear. I had only traveled by mirror once, when my powers first emerged and my grandmother had insisted Mama bring me to see her. I don't think Mama would have taken me if my grandmother hadn't threatened to come here instead.

Grandmother had scared me even more at the age of ten than she had at four. She was at least three hundred years old, but she didn't look her

age, resembling instead a mortal woman in her mid forties. Both times I had met her, she had worn a dress that covered her up to the neck, adorned with some overly ornate brocade. I remembered ten-year-old me had firmly believed her feathery hat would fly right off her head.

“Circe,” she had said stiffly, nodding to Mama. She turned to me, her frown deepening as her pale blue eyes took my measure, possibly looking for some flaw. “Elara.”

“Hello, Grandmother,” I said, dropping into a quick curtsy as was expected for the Crone of the Coven. Mama hadn’t said anything as she dropped into a curtsy next to me. As friendly and loving as she was with everyone, she was like ice around my grandmother. I knew they disagreed about a great many things, but I suspected that something else had happened between them to make their relationship so strained.

“Show me your magic, child,” my grandmother had said, looking down her long nose at me as if she was a displeased headmistress. I had shown her some small magic that I had newly mastered, clutching a crystal in my tiny, pudgy hand. She had nodded, a gleam of something close to approval in her icy gaze. She had beckoned us to follow her as she started making plans for my education and discussing how she would remodel a guest room for me at her manor and instruct me in the ways of the Coven herself.

“No,” Mama had said, resting a tight hand on my shoulder to stop me from following. My grandmother had turned and raised a perfect brow at her.

“No?” she repeated, taking a step closer to us. “What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“I mean,” Mama had said through gritted teeth, “that Elara will be staying with me, and I will be overseeing her education.”

The fight they’d had was deafening, and while young me didn’t understand most of it, I did learn two things that night. The first was that my grandmother could be very frightening if she wanted to be, and the second was that Mama absolutely hated her.

The sound of knocking at my door startled me. I went to open it, wondering if Vera’s mother needed our mirror. To my surprise, I found Vera waiting for me.

“I have had a brilliant idea,” she cried, pushing her way into our kitchen and producing a bright red cloak. I rolled my eyes, looking at her

with suspicion. Vera's ideas were usually reckless and poorly thought out, so I doubted this one would be brilliant.

"Finally have time for me then?" I asked, still irritated about the morning.

"Yes," said Vera, as if she didn't register my annoyance. "And I have a brilliant idea!" I sighed.

"What?" I asked resignedly. She grinned.

"Has your mother left already?" she asked, looking around the house as if someone might jump out at her.

"Yes, or she definitely would have heard you," I said. "Why aren't you at the meeting already? You're going to miss your invocation."

"That's just it," Vera said excitedly, thrusting the cloak at me and waving at me to put it on. She strode through the house as I shuffled after her, heading toward Mama's bedroom.

"What's it?" I asked, grabbing her hand to stop her. She grinned again.

"You're coming with me!" she said excitedly. "I can sneak you in!"

"This does not sound like a well-thought out plan," I said, frowning at Vera. I plucked at the red cloak. "Is this supposed to be a disguise?"

"Yes," she said, smiling proudly. "You never wear red. It clashes with your hair."

"This is going to backfire," I said darkly, trying to ignore the bubble of excitement that had grown in my chest. It would be reckless and stupid. I'd almost certainly be caught. But...

"No it won't," Vera said, practically buzzing with anticipation. "I asked my mother if I could arrive separately, you know, my first real Coven meeting, and she agreed. We'll sit in the back and no one will see you."

I pursed my lips, trying to think of how this could go wrong. So very many things came to mind. Mama would be horrified if she found me there, and who knew what my grandmother would do. Still, I was almost the age of maturity.

"Okay," I said, letting excitement overpower common sense. "But we cannot be seen!"

"Obviously," said Vera, casting the spell to open the mirror. She grabbed my hand and pulled me behind her. "That's why I brought the cloak! Come on."

We stepped from dusty stone floors to plush red carpet in an instant, emerging in what must be the main hall of the Covenstead. The walls were

paneled with deep, burgundy wood, and the sign of the Goddess was emblazoned on the wall in gold— two crescent moons flanking a full moon.

“The Goddess is testing me,” came a voice from around the corner. I looked at Vera, eyes wide, and motioned for her to move. She looked at me confused, and I pushed her around a corner and into an empty hallway.

“That’s my grandmother,” I whispered to her. Her eyes went wide in horror. Of course, her plan had gone immediately wrong.

We flattened ourselves against the wall of the hallway, trying to will ourselves into invisibility.

“The gossip, Circe,” came the voice of my grandmother again. “You have no idea how this looks to the rest of the Coven, keeping my granddaughter from me.”

“I don’t much care how this looks to the rest of the Coven,” I heard Mama reply, her voice harsher and colder than it usually was at home. If Mama was normally a warm, autumn evening, right now she was an icy winter morning.

“We must discuss Elara,” my grandmother said, in what I assumed must be her commanding Crone voice. “It’s high time she took her place at the Coven. She is the most talented witchling since you first came into your power.” Vera patted me in the shoulder.

“See?” she mouthed.

I hated agreeing with the woman Mama hated, but this time I kind of had to.

“There is nothing to discuss,” Mama said icily. “Elara is not yet grown, and I am her mother.”

“For another day,” my grandmother scoffed. “See how well keeping her in that hovel you call a cottage fares for you, daughter.”

“Anywhere is better than near you, mother,” Mama bit out. I heard their footsteps stop as my grandmother must have rounded on Mama.

“I need her power, Circe,” my grandmother said, almost pleading. “The Coven needs her. The Bloodwood will not fall without another powerful witch to help me. I cannot undo what has been done without her.”

“Enough, mother,” Mama said, her voice echoing slightly as she called on her power in her anger. “Elara is and will always be my daughter, not yours. I will not have her become part of your crusade.”

Their voices were trailing away, and I breathed out a sigh of relief that we had gone unnoticed.

“Phew,” Vera said, when the voices had died. “What was that about? What did the Crone mean about the Bloodwood falling and what has been done?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered back. “But we had better hurry.”

We emerged from our hiding spot and followed the direction that Mama and Grandmother’s voices had gone. There were a few witches still milling around outside the doors to the meeting, and Vera and I snuck into the back of the chamber behind a very ancient witch who was mostly blind and hard of hearing.

“This is it,” Vera hissed excitedly as I looked around the room. I had imagined this place to be a giant stone chamber, like a cave. It was similar, but instead of stone above us, the ceiling was completely open to the night sky. The full moon, symbol of the Mother, shone down upon us, and lit candles filled every open space, glowing warmly in the moonlight. There was a tapping at the center of the chamber as the meeting began.

*In the name of the Lady of the Moon,
Blessed be this place, and this time,
and they who are now with us.*

I wanted to be excited for the whole event, but in truth it was exceedingly dull. I wondered at myself for being so eager to attend and at Mama for not letting me. Several older witches, Coven mothers I guessed, droned on endlessly about Coven business and the blessings of the Goddess and the importance of vigilance against the demon scourge. I didn’t recognize any of these witches, and I had blessedly not seen Mama or Grandmother in the main chamber. I was practically dozing off against the wall when Vera was called up to perform the invocation.

I shrank down, covering my face with my cloak in case Mama saw me. Vera glided to the front, beaming at the other witches as she made her debut, placing the items of invocation in their correct places on the pentagram before her and saying the words, which she had finally memorized:

*Maiden, grant me patience,
Mother, grant me life.*

*Crone, grant me wisdom,
And lead me in the light.*

She glowed a faint gold, and I sighed with relief, hoping she remembered to close the spell. As if she could hear me nagging her, she added, “the spell is cast.”

“Welcome, Vera,” came a new, authoritative voice I recognized. My grandmother strode toward her, putting a firm hand on her shoulder and gesturing with her other to a place in front of the dais. “Take your place among your sisters. May the Triple Goddess bless you always.”

Curses, she was going to have to sit there the rest of the meeting. I sunk lower in my chair, willing the eyes of the crowd away from me.

“And now, a matter that requires a vote of all members,” said my grandmother, gesturing to the darkened aisleway. There was whispering among the crowd as a clanking sounded, and I frowned at the dark aisle, trying to see what was approaching.

“This witch has betrayed her sisters,” said my grandmother as a hush fell through the room. Two witches were dragging a third up the aisleway, the clanking made by the chains that dragged in the floor and bound her hands and feet. She was completely naked, and fresh wounds oozed blood down her back. I felt the blood drain from my face as I realized she had been whipped.

“She has been found to be consorting with demons in the Bloodwood,” my grandmother continued, to the hushed whispering of the gathered crowd. “Do you deny it?”

“I do not,” said the naked witch in a proud voice. I didn’t recognize her, but that was hardly surprising since I’d never been allowed to meet most of the Coven.

“And I hope the Horned One crushes you,” the voice added, hatred in every syllable. Someone spat on the dais, and gasps and murmurs filled the chamber. I had no idea who the Horned One was, but it must be bad.

“The penalty for this treason is death,” my grandmother said. “Unless a sister wishes to request mercy?”

The room was silent for several seconds. My heart was pounding so fast it was becoming difficult to concentrate. I willed my breathing to calm and my heartbeat to slow as I watched the trial unfold.

“I request mercy,” came a voice so familiar to me, there could be no mistaking it. More murmuring erupted as Mama stood. She was across the

room from me, and I was certainly cast in shadow, but I somehow felt her eyes meet mine across the darkness.

“On what grounds?” snapped my grandmother, anger rising in her tone as her expression became pinched.

“On the grounds that the Mother treats all life as sacred,” said Mama, gesturing around the room. My stomach hollowed. What would happen to Mama should the witch be found guilty? Was this normal for a witch trial?

“Let her be banished to the Bloodwood instead,” said Mama beseechingly. “Let the Goddess decide her fate.”

“The matter shall be taken to a vote,” said my grandmother severely. “All those in favor of sparing this witch?”

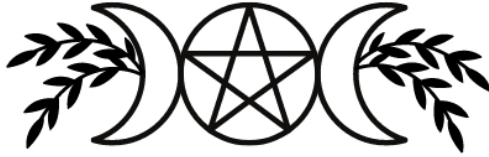
A few women rose to stand with Mama. My heart sank.

“All those in favor of condemning this witch?” my grandmother said. She had barely finished when chairs scratched against the floor and hundreds of witches stood to condemn their sister.

“So be it,” said my grandmother, turning to the prisoner. “For the crime of consorting with demons, I condemn you to death.”

With all the witches standing around me, it was difficult to see what happened next. There was a guttural scream, followed by a squelch, and a heavy thunk of something hitting the floor. My stomach turned.

“Remove the body,” came my grandmother’s voice. “And let us proceed with the meeting.”



Chapter 4

“Well, I can’t say that I’m surprised,” said Mama, pushing a cup of tea into my hands after I confessed what Vera and I had done.

After a fitful night of sleep, Mama had demanded to know why I looked like the dead, and I had been unable to think of a convincing lie. Sometimes, I wondered if Mama might have the gifts of a seer. She told me it was maternal instinct.

“Honestly,” she continued, sipping her own tea and looking gravely at the rain out the kitchen window, “I’m more surprised you didn’t sneak into a meeting before last night.”

“You are?” I asked, trying to sip my tea as the thunk of the dead witch’s body replayed over and over in my mind. Mama nodded, still unsmiling as she reached up to fiddle with the necklace.

“Every witchling tries it at some point,” she said, sighing heavily. “There are reasons I keep you away from your grandmother and the Coven,” she said, sitting across from me at the small kitchen table. “The brutality of Coven law is one of them.”

“I would have found out eventually,” I said. “You could have warned me.”

“I would have, if you had waited like we agreed,” Mama said tartly, pinching her lips. “Believe me, my heart, I have seen far worse at those meetings.”

She studied me over the top of her mug as I sat silently for a moment, contemplating the dead witch.

“Why did you speak for her?” I asked, frowning at Mama.

Mama sighed, lowering her mug and gazing at her folded hands.

“Everyone deserves mercy,” she said, looking up at me.

“But she admitted she was guilty,” I pushed. “She consorted with demons.”

Mama glanced at her open bedroom door before saying in a quiet voice, "Not everything you think you know about demons is true, my heart."

"What do you mean?" I asked. She shushed me, standing and going to close the door, before returning to the table and sitting across from me again. A bird screeched outside the window and I almost jumped out of my skin, making Mama smile for the first time since the Coven meeting.

"Enough for now," she said, returning to her normal volume. "I know you are almost a grown woman, and I will no longer be your keeper, but there are some truths I cannot tell you yet. Not until you are twenty-five."

She stood, taking my mug and leaving it in the sink as she tidied away the breakfast things. I had barely eaten, the sound of the body hitting the floor still haunting me.

"I turn twenty-five tomorrow," I pointed out, standing to my full height of five feet four inches. She sighed, kissing me on the cheek.

"Then I will tell you tomorrow, Elara," she said, frowning at me as I braided my messy hair out of the way. Tendrils of red clung to my sleep-deprived face, and she brushed it back lovingly with her fingers. "I'm going to the village today. There's a birthing mother who needs my assistance. Do you want to come? We can stop by the bakery and get those fluffy rolls you love."

I tried to think over my plans for the day, which at that point involved absolutely nothing. Vera had found me after the meeting last night, pale faced and sweating. We hadn't had time to really talk before I had to escape through the mirror, but she promised to visit as soon as she could.

Real baked goods and a day away from the house sounded like a wonderful idea. Much better than staying home and possibly destroying another pie, or imagining the dying witch, or worrying about all the things Mama wasn't telling me.

"I'll get my cloak."

It took three hours to travel to the village by horse. It was a depressing place on the best of days, but today was not that. Spring rains had turned

the paths muddy, and we would have been soaked through if not for Mama deflecting the rain with magic. I had grabbed the red cloak that Vera had brought me, feeling the need to have something of hers today, and I was a little worried the color would bleed through the soaked fabric and turn everything crimson.

The birthing mother, Marie, was indeed in need of assistance, and the shanty we arrived in looked like it had been in need of repairs for at least twenty years. Mama frowned, sending me to buy bread and cheese and fresh fruits and vegetables for the family with the money she had earned from her healing work. She insisted on spending her money in the mortal villages whenever possible, rather than in Ostara.

I was always impressed by her kindness, especially when most witches wouldn't bother helping a mortal woman with her birth for any amount of money. Mortal midwives were hard to come by, and expensive, and I knew Mama truly believed it when she had told the Coven that all life was sacred to the Goddess.

"The mortals need the money far more than we do," she said when I asked why we trekked the ten miles to the village to buy food instead of walking through the mirror to Ostara. "And exercise is good for the horses."

I cast a shield against the rain and returned with enough food to feed ten families. I went to work cutting bread and cheese for Marie's young children while Mama helped her, casting spells of health and protection around her tiny room as the woman cried out in pain. I managed to repair a few items around the house with quick-fix charms, using the supplies Mama had packed to set up a quick altar on the kitchen table from which to cast. I hoped the family wouldn't mind chalk dust staining their table.

The hours dragged slowly, and Marie's screams began to increase in intensity and frequency, to the point that I feared this was not a normal birth. After putting the children to bed, I had taken over the job of fetching hot water and finding clean towels.

"Mama?" I asked, peeking my head into the bedroom. I felt myself pale at the sight of the blood leaving Marie as she tried to deliver the child. Surely, this was not a normal amount of blood.

Mama smiled tiredly, squeezing Marie's hand and the father's tense shoulder before guiding me out to the kitchen, where she lit a candle for

light. She looked exhausted, with dark smudges under her eyes. Somehow, I felt more awake than I had this morning, and I ached to help somehow.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, catching hold of Mama’s apron as I passed her clean linens. It must be well past midnight—my birthday, I realized—but Mama was too focused to notice the lateness of the hour. “How can I help?”

“The baby is stuck,” Mama whispered. “I am doing what I can to save Marie now.”

“Save...” realization struck me like a blow. “The baby won’t survive?” Mama shook her head sadly.

“I lost its pulse hours ago,” she whispered, looking so sad that I had to resist the urge to wrap my arms around her. The idea of losing a baby was hard for any witch.

Witchlings were rare. Because we were long-lived, the Goddess had seen fit to maintain balance by making it rare to bear a child. I had begged for a sister many times as a child, and Mama had always laughed, telling me one witchling was more than enough. As I grew older, I realized that most witches were only ever blessed with one.

“I want to try using my magic to get the baby out,” Mama continued. “Marie is too exhausted to push anymore, and if we don’t remove the child, she will die. I need you to deliver the baby while I work the magic. Just guide the body out with your hands, and wrap it up as quickly as you can.” I felt my stomach lurch, willing the nausea back down as I nodded.

“Does she know?” I asked. Mama nodded sadly.

“She has several children she must survive for,” Mama said. “We will not let her die.” She squeezed my arm again as she headed back into the bedroom, and I squared my shoulders in an attempt to be as brave as she was.

“I think another big push will be enough,” Mama said gently to Marie, who was sobbing through exhaustion and loss. “I’m going to help you, and Elara is going to help pull the baby out.” She nodded toward me, and I sat positioned between the mother’s legs where I could see the baby’s head crowning. Childbirth was a horrifying business, and poor Marie would never even get to see her baby smile. It broke my heart.

“One big push, Marie,” Mama said, positioning her hands on the top of Marie’s stomach. “Ready, Elara?” I nodded, my hands tingling slightly as I sent my magic out toward the tiny body.

“And push!” said Mama, pushing her hands into Marie and whispering spells I couldn’t make out under her breath. The baby came slowly, a clammy, cold pale thing that I caught in my bare hands. I clutched it to my chest and grabbed a clean towel, trying to wrap the little creature up.

Marie sobbed while Mama comforted her and the baby’s father, and I looked at the innocent child in my arms, heart cracking that it had never had a chance to live. I ran a hand gently over its head, closing my eyes and praying that the Goddess give the child peace as it passed into the next life. I felt warmth beneath my fingers as I said the words, a strange, bright magic pouring out of me unbidden and into the cold skin of the child.

A rattling cry startled me, and I opened my eyes to see the little gray face reddening as the baby took in a deep lungful of air and wailed. Mama looked at me, eyes wide as I held the baby out to her. Mama took the child quickly, rubbing the little body and patting its back to help it breathe. The baby’s skin was pink now, and its wails grew loudly as it searched for its mother.

“There now,” Mama said, beaming widely at Marie and her husband. “I have never been more happy to be wrong. It’s a girl.”

She handed the baby to Marie, whose sobbing grew even louder as she took the bundle in her arms.

“Wait for me in the kitchen,” Mama whispered, pushing me out of my dazed stupor and toward the door while she cleaned up and helped Marie with the afterbirth.

I sat in stunned silence for another hour. The baby had been dead. I had seen her lifeless little body, and that no breath filled her lungs. And yet...now she lived. Could my prayer to the Goddess have worked? Only the Goddess possessed the powers of life, and I knew of no spell nor charm that could raise the dead. But I had felt magic pour out of me, and I somehow knew that it was my magic that had brought the babe back.

By the time Mama emerged from the bedroom, the night sky was beginning to lighten, and I was trembling.

“How did I...” I began, looking up to Mama, my hands splayed out as if in prayer. “Was that me?”

“Yes,” Mama whispered, sitting across from me and taking my shaking hands in hers. “Happy birthday, my heart.”

“Happy birthday?” I hissed incredulously, pulling my hands out of hers. “I just brought a child back from the dead! That was not witch

magic.”

“No,” she agreed with a heavy sigh. “But it *is* a gift.”

“Is this what you were going to tell me?” I asked accusingly, standing and pacing across the tiny kitchen. “Is this why you have kept me away from the Coven?”

“Yes,” Mama said simply. “Your grandmother will not see this magic as a gift, nor will the Coven. I had hoped that the Goddess might spare you this burden, but clearly I was wrong. It’s why you must run. Now.”

She stood, nodding to herself as resolve filled her eyes. With a pinched smile, she began bustling around the tiny, dilapidated mortal kitchen, throwing the rest of the bread and cheese and vegetables into her basket as I stared at her in shock.

“Run? Why? Where am I supposed to run?” I asked, watching her as she grabbed a knife from the wall, examined it, and threw it into the basket. “And why do I need a knife?”

“There’s not enough time, my heart,” she said, placing the basket on the table and pulling me to my feet. “That magic will be felt soon, if she hasn’t felt it already. You need to get as far from here as you can.”

“What? Where?” I asked as she threw the cloak around me. “Who will feel it?”

“Your grandmother,” she squeezed my hands. “You have demon magic. Your grandmother cannot know about it, but she will have felt it. I can only buy you a little time.”

“Demon magic?” I asked, ice filling my veins as I recoiled from what lived within me. Demons were wicked creatures, and giving life was a Goddess blessing. Why would demons be blessed by the Goddess?

“You are blessed and cursed with life and death,” Mama said, making no sense to me as she tied my cloak around my neck and pushed me out the door of the little house. “You need to go on foot. The stone can’t carry the horse. Go east. Find the Demon King and tell him you invoke the protection of the Horned God. I’ll come find you as soon as I can.”

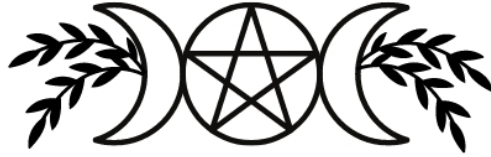
“What?” I asked again, feeling like I must be missing several vital pieces of information. “I don’t understand anything you’re saying. Tell me what is going on.”

Mama grabbed my shoulders and gave me a little shake.

“I love you, my heart, with everything I am,” she said. “And right now, I need you to go somewhere your grandmother can’t find you.”

She hastily unclasped the black stone necklace from her own neck and placed it around mine.

“Follow the stone,” she said. “It will guide you.” Mama wrapped me in her arms and whispered an incantation I couldn’t understand. Before I could ask her, I was swept into shadow.



Chapter 5

I landed with a crack on top of the basket, appearing in what must be the middle of the Bloodwood. The light was tinged a faint red, and the trees were black, gnarled things that looked eerie in the bloody light. It was fairly dark, so it must still be very early morning. I rose with a groan, hearing something snap beneath me and feeling a sharp pain in my arm.

The basket handle had split under my weight, and I cursed, inspecting the gash on my arm where the wood had cut into me when I landed. Just what I needed: the scent of blood to draw the monsters to me. Lovely.

“What in the name of the Goddess have you done, Mama,” I hissed through my teeth as I pulled one of the pieces of cloth that covered the cheese out of the broken basket and wrapped it around my arm. Healing spells required specific herbs, and I would need to dig through the basket to figure out what Mama had packed there. With a sigh, I sat on the damp, leafy ground and began sifting through the contents.

Another stab of pain in my wounded arm made me gasp, and I pulled away the cloth I had tied there to see the wound closing before my eyes. That bright magic coiled again in my stomach, surrounded by something darker and totally intangible. I nearly fainted at the shock, feeling my vision go blurry as nausea rose. That was definitely not witch magic.

“One thing at a time,” I said to myself, taking some deep, steadying breaths to calm my pounding heart. I finished my search through the basket and chose to ignore the demon magic I had inadvertently used for now. Maybe if I didn’t acknowledge it, it would go away.

Mama had packed more than she could ever need for a birth, and I had a sinking feeling she had known I might need this basket. After all, a good witch is always prepared, and Mama was one of the best.

She had packed a chunk of quartz, so I would be able to cast a simple mending spell to fix the basket handle. There was no good place to draw a

pentagram, so I gathered some sticks and twigs to form the rough shape of one on the ground, placing the basket in the center and invoking the magic. The handle snapped back together.

“The spell is cast,” I murmured, picking up the basket and standing to take in my surroundings.

It was a little lighter now, and everything still glowed reddish in the woods as the sun rose slowly. The trees grew thickly together, but without leaves in the way, I was able to make out the direction of the rising sun.

Mama wanted me to go east. I could turn and go west instead, but she had been insistent I be far away from my grandmother. Mama must have a good reason beyond escaping Coven law for sending me out here, but maybe not. Would they kill me for having demon magic? Clearly Mama believed so. My mind went to the thunk of the witch’s body hitting the floor at the Coven meeting. East it was then.

I sighed, sinking back to the ground and putting my head in my hands. I would give myself two minutes to think, and then I would move. I ran through Mama’s instructions in my mind.

First was to head east on foot. Simple enough. Then find the Demon King. That seemed like a terrible idea, but if I had demon magic, maybe that was why. Was I a demon? The thought made me panic for a moment, but no. Mama was definitely a witch. And demons couldn’t cross the Bloodwood. At least, I didn’t think they could. Was I cursed then? Mama had called it a blessing and a curse. That theory would have to do for now.

What was her next instruction? Invoke the protection of the Horned God. My mind reeled at this command. I had never heard of the Horned God before the Coven meeting last night—was that the same thing as the Horned One the dead witch had mentioned? I didn’t think there were any gods aside from the Triple Goddess. But if that witch had invoked him, and then my mother, maybe I was wrong.

Follow the stone. That was the last thing she had said. That the stone would guide me. I felt for the necklace and ran a finger over the black stone Mama always wore. It was slightly warm to the touch, and it seemed to buzz a little, making me withdraw my hand with a start. I didn’t feel it pulling me anywhere. I sighed, then stood and brushed off my skirt, looking east.

I began my arduous trek through the thick woods, thankful for my sturdy boots. There was no discernible path, so I walked over fallen logs

and around tree stumps for several hours, stumbling over myself and scratching my arms and hands. Every so often, I felt the demon magic heal my wounds, and I flinched, trying to ignore it. I finally stopped for a break when the sun was high enough overhead that I was fearful of getting turned around.

I sat, my back against the trunk of a wide, gnarled tree, and took an apple from my little pack and studied it thoughtfully. Mama had said I was blessed and cursed with the magic of life and death, whatever that meant. I wondered if it meant I could do more than just heal and give life. Narrowing my eyes, I imagined pulling the life from the apple, like a golden thread being drawn from a tapestry. A dark, shadowy thing in me seemed to raise its head, and I nearly threw the apple from me when the skin withered and blackened, horrified by what I had done.

Would it work in reverse?

Again, I tried to concentrate, pouring the magic back into the apple. I felt that light thing in me sputter and die, drained of power. Nothing happened.

I cursed and threw the ruined apple from me. Clearly my magic would take some practice. I wasn't even sure it was something I *should* practice. If this was a curse, maybe it would be temporary. Maybe the Demon King could break it.

"Happy birthday to me," I sighed, leaning my head back against the tree and closing my eyes.

I didn't mean to fall asleep, and when I awoke to late afternoon light, I was startled to find I was no longer alone.

A wolf, huge and brown, with yellow eyes, stared unblinkingly at me from several paces away. It looked exactly like the wolf from the other day, although I supposed I couldn't really be sure.

"Hello," I said cautiously, trying to stay perfectly still.

The wolf sniffed the withered apple I had discarded, then perked its head up to look at me. The black stone warmed against my chest, and I felt somehow sure that the wolf wouldn't harm me. If it had wanted to eat me, it would have done so yesterday. Maybe this wolf truly was some sort of guide or guardian. A hoot drew my attention upward as a large bird swooped down, landing neatly next to the wolf.

"Hoot," said the bird, tilting its head in the same direction as the wolf. It was large, about the size of a small child. Its eyes were huge and pale like

the full moon, and it ruffled its huge, feathery body, revealing wings that looked more like a bat's than a bird's. Not an owl, then.

"What in the name of the Goddess are you?" I murmured, sitting as still as possible so as not to startle it. While I didn't think an owl-creature-thing would eat me, its beak was sharp enough to do some damage, and the wolf was still studying me thoughtfully. Was there going to be a whole menagerie of creatures coming to find me here?

"Hoot," said the owl-creature again. The wolf, taking some command from the bird, padded toward me and sniffed my hand, pressing its wet nose insistently until I reached up and scratched its head.

"Well hello again, wolf," I said, smiling at the creature. "I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't eat me." The wolf huffed in what I hoped was agreement, and the bird gave another hoot, hopping over to inspect the rotten apple. It poked at it with its beak, then looked up at me with pale eyes again, somehow open wider than before. The wolf had done the exact same thing, but this poor creature's expression was almost comical. I would have laughed if at that moment it hadn't scooped up my basket in its talons and taken to the air.

"Hey!" I cried, jumping up and chasing after the bird. The wolf whined and ran behind me, its tongue lolling out happily as if it thought we were playing a game. "Bring that back!"

The owl-creature hooted again, somewhat more distantly as it flapped ahead, its great bat-like wings stretched wide as it soared through the blood red sky. For what must have been a full hour, I chased after it, pausing to catch my breath every so often against the trunk of a tree. The wolf stayed with me, pausing when I paused and whining if I took too long to move again. Several times I gave the basket up for lost when I looked up to see the owl-creature watching me, the basket still clutched tightly in its talons, as if goading me forward and daring me to take it back.

As evening fell, the owl-creature seemed to give up, dropping my basket unceremoniously and spilling its contents across the forest floor. With a docile "hoot," it landed on a branch above the spilled food.

"Demon owl," I grumbled, picking up and brushing the dirt off the bread, cheese, and fruit as the bird blinked its round, pale eyes innocently.

"She's a strix, actually."

I turned with a start to see a man leaning against a blackened tree, looking appraisingly at me as I chastised the bird.

“Oh,” I exclaimed, taking a step back in shock. The man wore riding leathers and a long, dark cloak, and though his face was shadowed by the hood, I saw a hint of dark hair sweeping over his forehead and green eyes shining in the dim evening light. A huntsman, maybe? There was a bow slung across his back and a dagger secured at his hip, so it seemed as likely as anything, although I didn’t think mortals ventured into the Bloodwood. At least, not willingly.

“A what?” I asked, hurriedly stuffing the food back into the basket before straightening.

“A strix,” he replied, stepping away from the tree and striding toward me. His voice was deep and smooth. Pleasant even. And he had a slight accent I had never heard before.

I backed up a step as he held out a gloved arm to the bird, who hopped onto the man’s forearm and rustled its feathers comfortably. “They are supposed to be creatures of ill-omen, but Artemis here has only ever brought me good luck.”

The huntsman stroked a finger under the strix’s beak, making it coo with pleasure at the attention. I scowled, still annoyed that this creature had led me on a wild chase through the forest. My boots were well worn and comfortable, but I could feel the blisters that had formed on the backs of my heels as I had run. I was in for a long, painful walk ahead with dirty food for my dinner. The wolf huffed and butted my hand with its wet nose, as if apologizing for its feathery companion. I lifted my hand to scratch its ears.

The man stopped stroking the strix, raising a brow at my hand on the wolf. The strix, clearly annoyed at the end of its massage, turned its head so that its lampent eyes fell upon me. I swear, it seemed to raise a brow as if to challenge me to complain about its little stunt. Suddenly, its bat-like wings folded around its feathery body as it swung itself upside down, gripping its talons into the huntsman’s arm and tucking its beak beneath a wing. The huntsman chuckled as he removed the bird from his arm and replaced it on the branch, where I supposed it must be sleeping now.

“What a bizarre creature,” I said,

“Strix guard the gates to the Darklands,” the huntsman said, turning his attention back to me and the wolf. “To stop unprepared mortals like you from wandering in blindly.”

I bristled at the accusation, but didn't bother to correct him. He gave me an appraising look before leaning against the tree where the strix perched and crossing his arms to study me again. His eyes widened almost imperceptibly as he saw Mama's necklace, and I quickly shoved it under my blouse and pulled my hood over my copper braid.

"So tell me, Red," said the huntsman, glancing up in the waning sunlight. "Why are you out here all alone with not a single weapon on you?"

"I don't see how that's your business," I said, taking yet another step back and moving my hand to the back of the wolf. "And as you see, I have a weapon."

The wolf turned, looking at me with apologetic eyes. The huntsman smirked and whistled, and the wolf's ears flattened as it let out a quiet whine and trotted over to the man's side. He stroked its head, crouching as the creature pressed its head to the man's neck in greeting.

"Traitor," I murmured. The man let out a laugh.

"Akela is a formidable weapon," he said, stroking the beast once, then standing and looking at me interestedly, "but he is not yours to wield, I'm afraid."

"You are master of strix and wolves then?" I asked, resisting the urge to take another step back from the huntsman. I had the nagging feeling that these animals had led me straight to their master, and it was beginning to feel a bit like a trap that I had walked right into.

"Only some," the huntsman replied, looking up to study me carefully. "What did you do to make them follow you?" I blinked.

"I'm sorry?" I asked, confused. The huntsman was looking at me skeptically.

"Did you feed them?" he asked. "How did you make them come to you?"

I laughed sarcastically.

"Believe me," I said, "I didn't do anything. They made *me* follow *them*. Or at least, the owl—strix—did. She stole my food." The huntsman's brows went up at this.

"And Akela?" he asked, nodding to the wolf at his side who stood at loyal attention next to his master. I shrugged.

"No idea," I said. "I think I saw him a couple of days ago as well. He just...sort of found me."

“Interesting,” the man said, running a hand absently over the wolf’s neck.

“Well,” I said, trying to inject authority into my voice. “As lovely as it was to meet your pets, I’m afraid I should be going.” I picked up my basket, intending to put distance between the stranger and myself. I had a mission of sorts, and since I wasn’t sure of this man’s motives, I needed to get on my way.

“Where on earth are you planning to go?” the huntsman asked, stepping toward me. I stiffened, and he raised his hands placatingly, as if I was a wild animal he was trying not to startle.

“No offense,” he said, stepping forward again, his hands still raised. I took a step back. “But what is a defenseless, mortal girl doing in the Bloodwood anyway?”

I found myself bristling more than I probably should at being called a “girl.”

“I’m not a mortal girl,” I snapped, scowling at him. “And I am not defenseless.”

“A witch then?” the huntsman asked, narrowing his eyes at me. I nodded. “A witch alone in the woods is a terrible thing.” He looked like he was worried I might bolt any second.

“Why are you out here, Red?” he asked. “And with a shadow stone,” he added, nodding to where I had stuffed the necklace down my shirt.

“What are you doing out here?” I asked, lifting a hand to cover the place where the stone rested. I had no idea what a shadow stone was, but this man didn’t need to know that. “Why would a mortal man have strayed so far into the woods?”

The huntsman raised a brow again, his mouth lifting into a grin that showed off his very white teeth. “Hunting,” he said, gesturing to his dagger. “Obviously.”

“Maybe I’m hunting for something too,” I said, backing up another step and immediately realizing my mistake. He had backed me against a tree, closing in on me enough that if I tried to run, he would almost certainly catch me.

“Interesting,” the huntsman said again.

“Is that your favorite word?” I snapped, rising fear making me feel defensive.

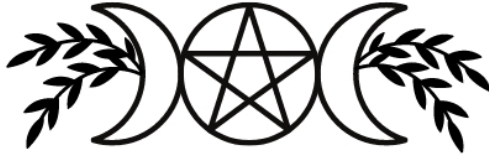
He frowned again, then took a step back and lowered his hands. “My apologies,” he said, a bit more gently than before. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“I’m not frightened,” I lied, trying to stand a little taller. The wolf, Akela, let out a pathetic little whine at the man’s side, and the strix, which was clearly only pretending to nap, made a sound that I would have called a guffaw had it come from a human.

“It will be nightfall sooner than later,” the huntsman said, gesturing toward the sky with his chin. The move caused his hood to fall back, revealing a striking face framed by dark, blue-black hair that was cropped close to the skull on one side and longer on the other. It fell across his temple in soft waves. “Daylight never lasts long here. Unless you have more than normal witch magic at your disposal,” the man continued, “there is no way you will make it out of these woods in one piece. At least, not without a guide.”

“And I suppose you are offering to guide me?” I asked, still feeling defensive, but also realizing I had literally no idea where I was going or what I was doing. The man’s frown lifted into a smirk.

“For a price, Red.”



Chapter 6

“That’s not my name,” I said irritably, clutching my basket close to me as I held my ground against the trunk of the tree. “And what kind of price?”

“Let’s start with your name, and go from there,” he said, voice rumbling as he closed the distance between us and held out his hand. I hesitated, staring at it.

“Your basket,” he said, looking at me in amusement. “I’m offering to carry it.”

“Oh,” I said, “No, thank you. I can manage.”

“Fine then,” he said, dropping his hand again. He was still smirking slightly. “How about that name?”

“You seem to have decided that it’s Red,” I said, uncertain about the wisdom of giving my true name to a complete stranger. There was power in a name, and I currently preferred to keep that power to myself.

“It is an all-encompassing color choice on your part,” the man said, gesturing to all of me. He seemed unbothered that I was withholding the one thing he had asked for. It irritated me. “Red it is then.”

He gestured to the side of the tree, as if directing me to move. When I stayed put, the huntsman started walking ahead of me, whistling to the wolf, who nudged my leg as he passed me, as if beckoning me to follow.

“What about your bird?” I asked, letting the wolf nudge me forward with the man. I wasn’t sure why I trusted the beast more than the mortal who was offering me help. Maybe because the wolf hadn’t demanded any payment.

“Artemis will be fine,” the man said unconcernedly, cutting through the brush ahead of me at a pace that was going to be murder for my blistered feet. “She knows the way home.”

“And where is home for you?” I asked, feeling like I had to jog to keep up with him. He was tall, his legs long, and he seemed disinclined to slow

down for me.

“Around,” he replied, unhelpfully. “Tell me where you are going.”

“The Darklands,” I said, deciding it was probably best not to tell this man the whole truth about my search for the Demon King. He stopped, turning slowly, his brows raised again in surprise.

“Really?” he asked. “Why?”

“It’s a long story,” I replied, hesitating over how much to say.

“It’s a long walk,” he replied with a grin. He looked at me expectantly, waiting for more of an answer.

I sighed. “My mother sent me.”

“And who is your mother?” he asked, taking a step toward me.

“Does it matter?” I asked, getting defensive again. “She’s a witch. You probably don’t know her.”

“Why is she sending you to the Darklands?” the huntsman asked. He had gone preternaturally still, as if he were a predator who didn’t wish to startle his prey. “Witches and demons don’t exactly get along, Red. The Demon King won’t welcome you.”

“Tell me your name, and I’ll maybe tell you my story,” I said, folding my arms defiantly across my chest, which was awkward to do while holding a bundle of bread. The man smirked.

“You can call me Hunt,” he said, turning and resuming his trek eastward.

“There’s no way you’re a huntsman named ‘Hunt’,” I said, jogging a little to catch him. “That would be too cruel.”

He laughed. “No,” he agreed. “But it’s what you can call me, *Red*.”

Fair enough, I supposed.

“And your price?” I asked, looking up to try and meet his eyes. It made my hood fall back again, and my reddish gold braid tumbled over my shoulder. I flicked it back as Hunt raised a brow, looking down at me contemplatively.

“For now, your story,” he said. “And then I’ll judge what payment will be enough.”

“Why should I trust you with my story?” I asked. I momentarily contemplated grabbing the knife from Mama’s basket to defend myself, but I would have no idea how to use it. The demon magic could probably be weaponized, but since I’d only used it twice and had no real handle on it, I didn’t want to rely on it.

“Because if you don’t,” he said, starting down a rather steep slope that seemed to lead to a gorge below us, “you won’t make it out of here alive.”

Hunt held out his hand again, and I gave him my pack, grateful to have an extra hand free to steady myself. He laughed.

“That time I wanted your hand,” he said, shifting the pack to his other hand and grasping my wrist right as I stumbled over a tree root. He steadied me, looking up expectantly until I had my feet under me again.

“Thanks,” I said, blushing slightly at my clumsiness. “Lead on.”

I followed Hunt unsteadily down the hill for what felt like at least an hour. We stopped talking, as I needed all of my concentration to make it down the hill, and he seemed to sense my focus. By the time we reached the bottom, my feet, lungs, and thighs were aching. I was in no shape for this.

I paused at the bottom, Hunt still holding my wrist, as my now pronounced limp made me stumble a bit. Akela whined in sympathy.

“You’re hurt,” Hunt said, looking down pointedly at my feet. “Do your boots not fit?”

“They fit fine,” I grumbled, using Hunt’s grip as leverage while I removed the boots. “But this little jaunt through the forest wasn’t exactly planned.”

The demon magic that had been healing me must have worn off, or decided to sleep, because my heels were torn bloody, and I had blisters that would rub something fierce if I had to walk any distance.

Hunt frowned. “You can’t traipse through the Bloodwood barefoot,” he said, frowning at me like I was a simpleton. “The blood could attract something, or you could injure yourself more. We’re stopping.”

“What?” I asked, wobbling slightly as Hunt released my wrist and dropped my basket alongside his pack. He crouched, rummaging through the pack as if looking for something.

“You wouldn’t happen to be able to cast a fire, would you?” he asked, glancing up at me hopefully as he produced a flint from his bag. He cleared a space on the ground of leaves and brush, then built up what looked to be a small campfire.

“Won’t a fire alert predators?” I asked warily, crouching on the ground in front of him. He looked up momentarily, then back down as he began to strike the flint.

“Yes,” he said, “which is why we will have to put it out before nightfall.”

He cursed, the flint not cooperating in his large hands. I took it from him and sketched the shape of a pentagram in the dirt, placing the flint in the center as I whispered the incantation for flame. The flint sparked, and the fire lit up with a small whoosh. Being a core element, the cost of basic fire magic was minimal, just the wood that ended up being burned.

"The spell is cast," I murmured, sitting back as Hunt looked at me, a little impressed.

"Neat trick," he said, unslinging his bow from his back. "If a little cumbersome. Stay here," he added, snapping his fingers at Akela and pointing to the ground next to me. The wolf padded over to me, curling up in a ball next to me and resting his shaggy head on his forepaws. "I'm going to look for something to eat. You should tend to your feet."

"I have bread," I said, pulling my pack toward me. "And cheese."

"Those won't help your feet," he called back, smirking at me as he walked away into the forest.

I rolled my eyes and removed my cloak, the leafy, twiggy ground making it difficult to sit comfortably. Situating myself against a nearby tree, I did my best to brush off the dirt from my injured feet and hissed.

Since I wasn't willing to call up the demon magic with Hunt nearby, and since I wasn't sure I should be playing with dangerous magic anyway, I'd have to take care of my feet with witch magic. Witch healing wasn't immediate like whatever demon magic had possessed me, but our magic still sped the process. All of the healing spells I knew required poultices or herbs, and I rummaged through Mama's basket to see if she had packed the right supplies. Of course she had.

I ground the comfrey, garlic, and St. John's wort into a paste that I spread over the blisters, intoning the words of healing as I did it. A warm tingling sensation told me the paste and spell were working.

Akela wriggled closer to me, resting his heavy head over my knee. I patted him after I was done with my feet.

"Are you sure you're not just a big dog?" I asked. He turned his head, narrowing a yellow eye at me as if in disdain, which made him look a little adorable, rather than fearsome. I laughed, resuming my scratching of his head until he closed his eyes, his head sinking contentedly onto his forepaws.

Hunt wasn't gone long. He returned with what looked to be two rather small rabbits held by the ears. He shot me and Akela a surprised look, then

set to work skinning and gutting the things. I grimaced.

“If you want to eat enough to hike through the Bloodwood all day,” he said, not looking up from his work as he spoke, “then you’ll have to stomach eating rough.”

“How long will it take us to reach the Darklands?” I asked, watching him as he quickly and efficiently prepared the rabbits, skewering the meat on a long stick that he held over the fire.

“Who says that’s where we’re going?” he asked, looking up at me with an eyebrow raised. I frowned.

“Why else would I follow you?” I asked, growing irritated that I had wasted the whole day following this man if he wasn’t actually going to help me. I stood, brushing off my skirts and cloak.

“Because you will almost certainly be eaten if you don’t,” he said irritably. “Sit back down.” I gawked at the command.

“No,” I said, anger bubbling as I watched Hunt, who was entirely focused on the rabbits. “If you’re not planning to help me, I think I’ll take my chances with the monsters.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t help you,” Hunt replied placidly, as if he were oblivious to my growing irritation. “I just don’t know that it’s wise to take you to the Darklands.”

“Well that’s where I need to go,” I snapped, throwing my supplies back together as I readied myself to leave. “So you can take me, or I will go myself.”

“Fine,” he said. “Best of luck to you.”

I gaped, having not really believed he would let me go off on my own after making such a show of insisting he help me.

“Fine,” I replied, pulling on my boots and picking up my basket. “Goodbye.”

I limped away, trying my best to look haughty despite my fear of the woods and the pain of my still healing blisters.

“That’s west,” came Hunt’s voice, amusement lacing his words. I ground my teeth and took a deep, cleansing breath, willing myself not to test my life and death magic on him. Turning, I began heading east. Akela whined sadly.

To my satisfaction, I heard Hunt sigh irritably. I thought I heard him say something like, “you’d better be right about her,” which didn’t make

any sense, but I refused to turn and look as I heard him stand and move to catch up with me.

“Fine, Red,” he said, jogging to overtake me and stopping in front of me. “Stop acting like a petulant child.”

“I am not a child,” I snapped, realizing it probably sounded very much like I was. Hunt rolled his eyes.

“Gods help me, I can’t let an injured witch run off into the woods to face certain death,” he said. “I’ll help you.”

“Really?” I asked, a jolt of relief passing through me. I had very much hoped he would relent. “You’ll guide me to the Darklands?”

He ground his teeth.

“I think it’s a terrible idea for a witch to go there, but if you insist, then yes,” he said.

“Why help me?” I asked suspiciously, letting him take my elbow to guide me back to the warmth of the small fire. The sun was setting in earnest now, and I was glad of its heat and light. “You don’t know who I am or what I want to do in the Darklands.”

“Because,” he said, returning to his seat and pulling the meat from the fire. He tested it with his fingers, hissing slightly and sucking on them when the meat burned. I tried not to watch him as he put his fingers in his mouth, but he had a nice looking mouth.

I needed to get a grip.

“Because Akela likes you,” he said, nodding to the wolf who had replaced his head on my knee when I had returned. “Which is unusual. He doesn’t like anyone. Except me, of course.”

“That’s it?” I asked. “Because your pet wolf likes me?” Akela huffed derisively, and Hunt chuckled.

“He’s not my pet,” Hunt said, “and I have other reasons. Including my desire not to be cursed by the Horned God for letting an innocent perish in these woods. And I’ll still be demanding payment.”

I frowned, taking the meat he offered and trying to decide which statement to ask about first. I blew on the meat to cool it and took a tentative bite. It was gamey, and tough, but it was food. “Who is the Horned God?”

Mama had told me to ask for protection in the name of the Horned God, but this man didn’t need to know about Mama’s command.

Hunt looked at me, raising a skeptical brow.

“Witches don’t worship the Horned God?” he asked, taking a bite of his own meat. He ate quickly and neatly, as if the food was nothing more than fuel for his broad body.

“No,” I said, frowning. I had never heard of mortals worshipping a Horned God either, but to be fair, I didn’t chat with a lot of mortals. “Witches venerate the Triple Goddess. Maiden, Mother, and Crone. She is the threefold deity, Mother of all.”

“Interesting,” Hunt said again, finishing his meat.

“You say that a lot,” I said snappishly, aware that he hadn’t actually answered my question. Hunt smirked, shrugging.

“You’re an interesting witch,” he replied, studying me as if he truly did find me an interesting specimen to behold.

“So tell me,” he continued, yawning. “Why is a witch, who doesn’t know of the Horned God, on her way to the Darklands?”

“Why is a mortal man wandering through the Bloodwood rescuing witches?” I countered, looking at him with narrowed eyes. Hunt laughed.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re difficult?” he asked, leaning back and stretching out his long legs ostentatiously, as if he knew he cut a striking figure.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re infuriating?” I replied, giving him a tight-lipped smile. He laughed again.

“Fine, keep your secrets,” he said, reaching forward to smother the small fire. We were plunged into cold and fading gray light as the sun disappeared behind the trees. “I’ve decided what payment I want anyway.”

“And what is that?” I asked, wrapping my cloak more tightly around me for warmth. Akela snuggled closer, resting his head on my lap.

“Now who’s the traitor?” Hunt asked, giving the wolf a pointed stare. Akela huffed, making me smile.

“I want the shadow stone,” he said, looking back at me.

“What?” I asked, startled as I met his green eyes, which were difficult to make out in the growing darkness.

“The necklace you’re hiding,” Hunt said, looking pointedly at the small bulge under my bodice. “That’s my price.”

“It’s Mama’s,” I said, the idea of handing it over to this stranger making me anxious. Not only was it my only connection to her, but it was precious to her, and she had told me to follow it. “Why do you want it?”

I half expected him not to answer, and he seemed to hesitate a moment before he finally replied.

“Shadow stones have power,” he said with a shrug. “They’re valued by the demon courts. Having one might prove useful.”

He seemed so nonchalant about it, I was positive he wasn’t telling me the whole truth. I pursed my lips.

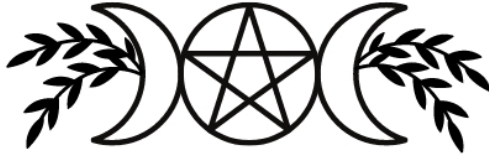
“Take it or leave it, Red,” he said. “That’s my price. If you don’t want to pay it, we part ways in the morning.”

I bit my bottom lip, trying to think my way around this. I supposed if I could keep the stone until we reached the Demon King, I would be following Mama’s instructions. I would have to beg her forgiveness for the loss of something she cherished, though.

“Fine,” I said, choosing my words slowly and carefully. “I will give you the stone after you have safely delivered me to where I need to go.” Hunt narrowed his eyes, looking at me like he expected a trick. I raised my brows innocently.

“It’s a bargain,” he said, holding out a hand to me. I took it. It was large and warm and calloused as if he spent most of his life wielding a weapon or an ax. I supposed he probably had.

Before I realized what he was doing, he had turned my hand wrist-up and slit a line of fire across it.



Chapter 7

“Hey,” I shouted, trying to pull back. He held my hand fast, using his other hand to slice his own wrist before pressing the bleeding wounds together. Something zinged across my wrist and I yelped again, pulling it back. This time, Hunt let it go.

“What the hell was that?” I shouted, scrabbling backward so I could examine the cut. To my surprise, there was nothing but a thin, red scar where he had sliced across my wrist.

“Are you really telling me you’re a witch who doesn’t know how to cast a blood bargain?” Hunt asked, showing me his own wrist, which had a matching red line across it.

“Blood magic is demon magic,” I said angrily. “Witch magic relies on the elements. And how exactly does a mortal man know blood magic anyway?”

Hunt shrugged, looking at me with interest. “You pick things up when you live out here,” he replied. “And that will ensure you don’t trick me out of my payment,” he added, nodding to the wrist, which I was now holding to my chest.

I scowled, but I wasn’t sure he could see it in the dying light. “You should have asked me first,” I said angrily. Akela seemed to growl on my behalf, and I faintly saw Hunt roll his eyes.

“She’s fine,” he said to the wolf. “And you would have said no,” he added, stretching as he began to close the distance between us.

“What do you think you’re doing now?” I asked, pressing myself closer to the tree. He paused his prowling, crouched on the ground in front of me with his hood still obscuring his face.

“It’s about to get freezing out here,” he said, tilting his head to the side. “I don’t know about you, Red, but I’d rather not freeze to death in the night, and you’ve taken my wolf.”

“So?” I asked, patting Akela’s head. The wolf snuffed and gave a little whine, looking at me as if begging leniency for his master.

“So,” Hunt continued, resuming his prowling until he was settled next to me by the tree. “Unless you can magic our cloaks to be warmer, you can either give him back, or we can share.”

I stiffened as the huge wolf stood and turned in a circle, settling himself between my hip and Hunt’s. Magic didn’t work the way Hunt suggested, and I felt certain he knew that.

“Here,” Hunt grunted, holding the edge of his cloak out expectantly.

“What?” I asked, looking at him skeptically.

“Gods, woman, you are impossible,” he growled. “Get under the cloak. You look half dead, and I can see you shivering.”

“I...” I hesitated. As much as I felt certain it was a bad idea to trust a stranger, I did have my magic, and I trusted Akela. I supposed if Hunt tried anything, I could call on the death magic and hope for the best.

“Thank you,” I said, leaning forward so he could put his cloak around me. It smelled like evergreen trees and spices, and I wondered how he could pick up such a scent from these twisted, dark woods.

The wolf between us was a warm, comforting barrier, and Hunt crossed his arms beneath the rest of his cloak, leaning back on the trunk. I tried to emulate his position, pulling my own cloak and the edge of his tighter around me. It wouldn’t be a comfortable way to sleep, but I was so exhausted it might not actually matter.

A loud screech made me start, and Akela snuffed irritably. Hunt let out a low chuckle.

“It’s just Artemis,” he said, resting his head back on the trunk of the gnarled tree. “Go to sleep, Red.”

“How can I sleep when anything could come eat us?” I asked irritably, trying to shift against the tree trunk to get more comfortable.

“Nothing will eat us with Akela here,” Hunt said, sounding utterly unconcerned. “But you’re a witch. Cast a protection spell or something if you’re so worried.”

“Witch magic doesn’t work like that,” I grumbled. “I need materials for a protection spell. Only demon magic can be cast on a whim.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to rely on Akela and me to keep you safe,” Hunt replied, resting his head against the tree trunk with his eyes closed as if determined to find sleep before me.

I felt certain I would not be able to go to sleep. I thought over the details of the day as I fiddled with the shadow stone necklace absently. Was Mama still safe, or was she also running from my grandmother? Would my grandmother come after me in the Bloodwood? Would she really kill me if she found me? I wanted to believe she wouldn't, but the sound of the murdered witch hitting the dais told me that she might.

"How did your mother come by that stone?" Hunt asked. I glanced up, surprised to see him watching me out of one eye.

"It was a gift from my father," I said, releasing the stone so it was once again hidden under my blouse.

"Really?" Hunt asked, opening his other eye and looking at me with disbelief.

"Why is that so hard to believe?" I asked snappishly. Hunt narrowed his eyes for a moment, as if trying to decide if I was lying.

"No reason," he said, closing his eyes again. "But it's interesting."

"Goddess above," I mumbled, praying for patience. "No one has ever found me as interesting as you seem to."

"Clearly, no one has been paying enough attention," Hunt replied in a husky voice, making my stomach give a funny little lurch. The way he spoke about me was somehow both infuriating and sensual. It bothered me.

"Good night," I bit out, determinedly closing my eyes and resting my head against the trunk of the tree. Hunt's reply was a low chuckle.

"Sleep well, Red."

Only minutes seemed to have passed when I woke up with a start, Artemis's screech was like some kind of bizarre alarm clock in the middle of the woods.

I sat up, realizing I had been lying on the ground, my face buried in Akela's warm fur as he slept under me. Hunt was gone, but his cloak was draped over me like a blanket, so I assumed he was nearby. I rubbed my face, feeling my eyes itch from being pressed against fur half the night, and looked up.

The strix was perched on the tree above me, gazing down with her pale eyes as if I were a curiosity to puzzle out. She hooted softly, ruffling her feathers as she settled more comfortably, her bat-like wings folded in close to her body.

“You’re still on my list,” I said irritably to the bird. “Don’t even try to ingratiate yourself to me.” She tilted her head and hooted again.

“Is it normal for witches to talk to animals?” came a smooth, slightly accented male voice. It had a soft, lifting quality to it, and I was annoyed that my heart gave a little leap when I heard it.

Hunt reappeared, moving forward and holding out his arm for Artemis to flap down to. In the dim, reddish morning light, he looked less fearsome without the cloak, his hair slightly out of place from sleeping upright and his shirt unbuttoned at the throat.

He crouched, letting Artemis hop up to his shoulder as he studied me.

“You look less like a corpse today, at least,” he said in a voice that made it seem like he believed this to be a compliment. With his cloak off, I could study the broad cut of his shoulders and arms beneath the leather. He was clearly used to physical activity, and it was annoying that he looked so well-rested after a night on the forest floor. I scowled, throwing his cloak at him.

“Still grumpy like one, though,” he added, throwing the cloak around his shoulders, making Artemis hop lithely away and back to the branch of the tree above me.

“Maybe I’m grumpy because you called me a corpse,” I grumbled, stretching and hearing more joints than was probably normal popping and cracking.

“I said you looked *less* like a corpse,” he corrected, smirking when I continued to scowl and crouching down before me. “Will breakfast improve your mood?”

“Maiming you would improve my mood,” I said, shaking out my hair to remove the twigs and leaves and rebraiding it a little more tidily.

“Alas, there will be no maiming,” Hunt said genially, as if we were discussing the likelihood of finding sausages lying about the woods. “What do you have in that basket?”

I pulled out the now slightly stale bread and a hunk of cheese and split it between us. I gave Hunt the slightly larger halves as I studied him. He was a large man, and I assumed he needed more food than I did to power

his muscular frame. His square jaw had a hint of stubble that wasn't there the day before, so I assumed he must have a more permanent camp somewhere nearby. He wasn't carrying supplies other than his weapons.

"It's rude to stare," Hunt said, snapping me out of my reverie. I scowled again, biting into a chunk of bread. "And your face will stick like that if you keep it up."

"Would you prefer I smile?" I asked, forcing my lips into the parody of pleasantness.

"I prefer you not bite my head off first thing in the morning," he replied dryly. "Especially if we will be forced to spend several mornings together."

"Several?" I asked, raising a brow at him. "How long exactly will it take to get to the Darklands?"

"From here," Hunt said, looking around thoughtfully, "probably three days or so."

"Three days?" I exclaimed. That seemed like a ridiculously long time to traverse a forest. Hunt looked at me skeptically.

"Do you have any idea how big the Bloodwood is?" he asked, taking a large bite out of the cheese. "It's fifty miles across at least."

"Fifty miles?" I asked incredulously. I had never seen a proper map of the Bloodwood, and I wasn't even sure one existed. The Demons had created the wood to trap us in the Witchlands, but fifty miles of Bloodwood seemed to be a little much. "Why is it so big?" I asked, chewing on my bread.

Hunt frowned. "You're a witch," he said. "You tell me."

"How should I know?" I asked irritably. "You seem to know a lot about demons. I thought perhaps you'd know."

Hunt continued frowning at me.

"What?" I asked, lowering my bread and frowning back.

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head as he finished his share of the breakfast. "It's just..." he looked at me with a smirk.

"Don't say it," I growled, feeling somehow both irritated and excited by the smirk he kept giving me.

"Interesting." His smile morphed into a grin and good Goddess above, I needed to stop getting distracted by his lips.

I rolled my eyes in what I hoped was a convincing show of annoyance and stood. A quick inspection of my heels told me they were well on their

way to being mended, and I gingerly slipped my boots back on. The discomfort was tolerable, so I squared my shoulders, ready for a long day of hiking. Hunt was still sitting sprawled on the ground, looking up at me as he rested his arm on a knee.

“Ready?” I asked, feeling a little unnerved by his stare. And excited, if I was honest. No man had ever looked at me as long or as intently as he did, and he was thankfully not terrible to look at. Maybe Vera was justified in her pursuit of pleasure now and then.

A pang struck me at the thought of my friend. She would have no idea what had happened or where I had gone. Would she try to come find me?

“Let me ask something, Red,” Hunt said, snapping me out of my anxious thoughts as he stood and brushed leaves from his cloak. “How much exactly do you know about demons?”

“Not much,” I said with a shrug, picking up my basket and gesturing for him to lead the way.

“Tell me what you think you know,” he said, as Akela loped to his side and Artemis took off with a screech.

I sighed. “Well, what all mortals and witches know, I suppose,” I said, trying my best to follow his footsteps on the uneven terrain. It was difficult as his legs were so much longer than mine. “That they practice blood magic. That they banished us to the Witchlands and keep us trapped behind the Bloodwood because they want our magic. That they tortured the mortals, feeding off their fears, until the Coven saved them.”

Hunt let out a strangled sound that might have been a laugh.

“What complete bullshit,” he scoffed, cutting a path through the thick undergrowth with his dagger.

“What is?” I asked, panting a bit to keep up with him. There was no way I would be able to maintain this pace all day.

“All of it,” Hunt said angrily.

“Excuse me,” I said, a little affronted that he was disparaging everything I knew. “But you performed blood magic yourself.”

“Fine,” he conceded, “the blood magic part is true for some demons. But the rest is all lies.”

“Wait,” I added, another question striking me as I huffed after him. “How did you even do that as a human? Do humans in the Darklands have magic? And why would the Coven lie about demons anyway?”

I remembered that Mama had suggested not everything we knew about demons to be true. Now that I thought about it, I realized a lot of what I knew to be true I had heard from Vera. Mama rarely spoke of the demons in front of me growing up, but Vera would tell me stories from her mother that turned my blood to ice. Stories about demons eating mortal babies and seducing witches to drink their blood. I supposed some of it might have been girlish exaggeration.

“And how do you claim to know so much anyway?” I continued when he didn’t answer, stopping to catch my breath against a tree. Hunt stopped too, frowning down at me.

“If this is the fastest you can move, then it’s going to take twice as long to cross out of the Bloodwood,” he said, folding his arms and leaning on a tree across from me.

“I’m sorry,” I said irritably. “I’m not used to hiking all over the woods with annoying men and their pets for hours at a time.”

Hunt muttered something to the sky that sounded a lot like “Goddess save me,” then looked back down at me with a scowl.

“Should I carry you, your highness?” he asked. “Or perhaps you would prefer a nobler steed?” he added, gesturing to the large wolf standing next to him.

“I’d prefer you to slow down a little,” I said, finally feeling like I had enough breath to push myself off the tree. “And to answer some of my Goddess-damned questions.”

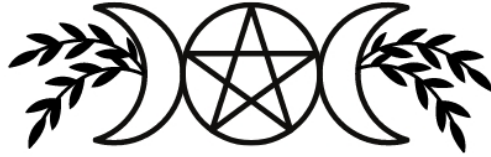
“I’m trying to get us through quickly so we don’t get eaten,” Hunt said, a little more gently as his scowl relaxed. “But I will try to slow a little, and I may even deign to answer a question or two when it’s safe to stop. You know, you could try to be a little nicer in return.”

My stomach lurched. I hadn’t meant to be rude or snappish, but I definitely had been taking out my frustration on the man who would ostensibly get me out of this wretched place.

“Thank you,” I said more gently as Hunt slowed his pace a little. He grunted in response, still trudging ahead of me through the wood.

“Wait,” I said, finally registering everything he had said. “What do you mean? What will eat us?”

“You don’t want to know,” Hunt said darkly, plunging back into the endless wood and forcing me to follow.



Chapter 8

“My feet are killing me,” I complained. We had hiked all day through the Bloodwood, the path seeming to become more difficult to traverse the farther we penetrated into the wood. The trees grew more densely, and huge, gnarled roots stuck out from the ground in odd places. I had tripped and landed on my face more than once, and both my legs and my ego were bruised.

On the bright side, my new magical abilities had seemed to have disappeared. I had surreptitiously tried to ruin another apple when Hunt wasn’t watching, just to make sure I could still do it, and nothing had happened. That new well of magic inside me seemed to be dry, and both the bright and shadowy beasts inside me slept. I could still feel them there, but they were dormant and drained of power. I wondered what fueled this magic to make it live and die as it did, but I supposed that at least my chances of accidentally killing my travel companions were less if my magic wasn’t cooperating.

“It’s those damn boots,” said Hunt as he roasted more rabbit over the fire. I supposed I would have to get used to a diet of primarily stale bread and rabbit for the next few days.

“As I have already said,” I replied, trying to eat my rabbit with as much dignity as I could muster. “I didn’t exactly have time to plan this venture. I didn’t have time to buy new boots.”

“Why did you leave in such a hurry?” Hunt asked, narrowing his eyes at me. “You must have had some kind of plan. You have a basket of supplies after all.”

“The supplies were Mama’s idea,” I replied, frowning to cover the fact that I was desperately trying to decide how much to tell him. “And I left in a hurry because my life was in danger.”

“In danger from what?” Hunt asked, still looking at me over the fire.

"It doesn't matter," I said, shaking my head. My hood slipped down, and I tugged it back up. If nothing else, it kept my neck warm. "Mama thought I'd be safer in the Darklands than the Witchlands, so here I am."

"Your story makes no sense, Red," Hunt said, shaking his head in disbelief. "You're either lying, or omitting something important."

"As we already established," I said. "I don't know you well enough to give you my whole story. You still haven't told me how you, a mortal man, live and survive in the Bloodwood."

"Ah," Hunt said, raising a brow at me. "So if I want to know your secrets, I need to tell you mine? Is that it?"

"It only seems fair," I replied, checking that the necklace still hung beneath my blouse.

Hunt caught the movement. "How did your father happen upon a shadow stone?" he asked, nodding to where the necklace lay hidden. "They're not exactly common, even in the Darklands. I've never heard of one being found in the Witchlands."

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I've never met my father."

"I'm sorry," said Hunt, a bit more gently.

I shrugged, acting like it didn't matter much to me. "It's fine," I said. "I don't know if he's even alive. Mama refused to talk about him, so I'm guessing he's not."

Hunt nodded, for once saying nothing and letting the cracking of the fire fill the silence between us.

"Why do you care so much about the stone?" I asked, genuinely curious about it. I didn't want to give it up, and if I played my cards right, I might not have to. And I should definitely know more about it if it was valuable.

"I told you," said Hunt. "Shadow stones are rare and powerful. Having one offers me certain...advantages that I don't otherwise have." He gave me an odd look, as if he couldn't believe that I didn't understand the stone around my neck.

"It's never done anything particularly special for Mama," I said, removing the stone from my shirt and running a thumb over the smooth, black surface. It hummed at my touch, and I nearly dropped it in surprise.

"Maybe it has and you just didn't realize it," Hunt said, eyes locked on the stone at my throat so that he missed my surprise. "Has it done anything special since you've been wearing it?"

“No,” I lied, choosing not to tell him about being pushed through shadow into the Bloodwood. Or the humming. “And how do you know so much about the Darklands anyway?” I asked, shoving the stone back down my shirt.

Hunt shrugged. “I’ve had a lot of dealings with demons,” he said, looking back down at the fire as he finished roasting the rabbit. “Far more than with witches, actually.”

“Here in the Bloodwood?” I asked, taking another bite of the gamey meat.

“Demons rarely enter the Bloodwood,” Hunt replied with a scoff. I frowned, remembering my grandmother’s fear of the demons prowling the Bloodwood in search of stray witches.

“Then how?” I pressed, growing increasingly annoyed with Hunt’s reticence. I hadn’t exactly told him my whole story, but I felt like he had shared nothing.

“I work for them,” he replied, looking up with a smirk as if he knew he was annoying me.

“I thought demons had killed all the mortals,” I said, surprised to hear that they would want to associate with a mortal at all, let alone hire one. Hunt laughed.

“You have been sorely misled about demons, Red,” he said, sounding both amused and annoyed.

“So, are there many mortals in the Darklands?” I asked, more confused than when I had begun this line of questioning. “What do you do for them?”

“Yes, and a little of everything,” Hunt replied, removing the rabbit from the fire and smothering the flame with a booted foot. I could tell he was done answering my questions, and I scowled even more at the conflicting information I was trying to process.

If demons didn’t kill the mortals, maybe that was why Mama had sent me to the Darklands. Except I wasn’t a mortal, I was a witch. My head hurt.

It was hard to see in the fading light, but Hunt seemed to stiffen all of a sudden.

“What—” I started.

“Shhh,” he said, reaching back for his bow. I sat as still as I could, trying to hear whatever it was Hunt had heard. A faint flapping overhead

told me that Artemis had gone to investigate, and Akela growled quietly beside me.

“Stay here,” Hunt said quietly, reaching behind him to pull his bow from his back and nocking an arrow. He stood, stamping out the fire as Akela prowled closer to me and rested his large, shaggy head on my knee.

I said nothing as Hunt disappeared into the wood, moving as quietly as a cat as he hunted for whatever it was he had heard. I strained, trying to hear whatever it was too, and shivering slightly from the cold and mild terror. Witch magic wasn’t offensive, and I had nothing to cast a defensive spell. Moreover, with my newfound death magic not working, I didn’t really have a plan for how I would escape a beast or monster if one found me.

Akela snuffled, reminding me of his presence, and I scratched behind his ear.

Hunt returned a few minutes later, still clearly on edge, his bow still nocked.

“What was it?” I asked, Akela still growling slightly as if annoyed that his master had returned empty handed.

“Not sure,” said Hunt tersely, crouching to scratch Akela’s head before flopping down on the ground beside me. He folded his hands behind his head and glanced over at me. “Better get some sleep while you can, Red,” he said. “Akela will keep watch.”

I nodded, turning on my side and wrapping my cloak around me as I tried to get comfortable on the forest floor. I briefly thought about casting a protection charm, but I was tired and cold, and I believed that Akela would watch over us. The great wolf took up a place between us as he had the night before, and I tried to let his warmth seep into me and lull me to sleep.

I think I had maybe just dozed off when a cry woke me. I sat up, looking around our patch of woods to see what could have made the noise. I heard it again, coming from a little further away.

“Hunt,” I whispered. He slept like the dead and I cursed. Akela whined at my side.

“Come on,” I whispered, scrambling to my feet next to the giant wolf. Akela whined again, but he followed me as I headed in the direction of the sound. Hunt had said he was an excellent weapon, and I’d have to trust him to keep me safe.

The sound came again, farther away this time. It sounded like crying, or maybe wailing. Was someone hurt or being dragged away by monsters?

Akela and I crept through the wood, following the sound. We must have been growing closer, because the sound grew louder and the crying grew more insistent.

A hand clamped around my mouth, startling a muffled shriek out of me as a firm arm gripped my waist.

"It's a leshy," a deep voice rumbled in my ear. I breathed out a sigh of relief as Hunt released me. "A forest spirit," he added by way of explanation. "They lure other creatures into their bogs by mimicking crying or wailing, like a wounded animal."

"What do they do then?" I whispered. Hunt still had his arm around my waist, his jaw pressed against my cheek. I felt him give a wry smile.

"They eat you," he said, releasing my waist and spinning me to face him. He held me by the arm as he leaned down close to me, upper lip bared in a snarl. "Don't run off in the middle of the night, Red. It would be extremely stupid."

"I wasn't running off," I snapped, pulling my arm from his grip. "I was trying to help."

"Well don't," he said angrily, gripping my hand firmly and tugging me back toward our camp. Akela growled faintly, and I realized with more than a little surprise that he was growling at Hunt, not me.

Hunt shot the wolf an exasperated look. "She's fine," he said to Akela before returning his attention to me. "And anything that sounds like it needs your help out here is likely looking for its next meal. I can't chase after you all the time to stop you from being eaten."

"I can take care of myself," I replied irritably, stumbling a bit as he pulled me through the woods. I felt embarrassment and shame curl in my stomach, and my instinct was to lash out with anger instead of facing them. A hoot above us warned me that Artemis was near, and probably guiding Hunt back toward our camp.

"Could have fooled me," he said harshly, turning to glare at me as he pressed on through the trees. "And unless you have some magic power I haven't seen yet," he added, pulling me through the trees to our little clearing and stomping back to where he had been sleeping, "you *can't* take care of yourself."

I pursed my lips, choosing to say nothing as I returned to his side and lay back down, scooting a little farther away from him out of spite. He was right. I didn't have magic that I could use to defend myself. It had been stupid to wander off.

Akela settled in front of me instead of between us, and I felt a surge of victory as I patted his fuzzy head that he had chosen to sleep next to me. The feeling died a moment later.

"What do you think you're doing," I hissed, turning as I felt Hunt close the distance between us and press his hard body against my back.

"Making sure you don't run off again," he growled, throwing his arm over me, effectively pinning me in place.

"Get off," I said, trying to push his arm away. Goddess above, he was strong, and he banded his arm more tightly the more I struggled. The feeling of him against me was doing unexpected things to my stomach, and I wiggled to try to get away from him.

"This is going to become a lot more embarrassing for you if you keep wriggling," he growled, hot breath skating over my ear as he held me pressed against him.

I stopped, blushing furiously as the meaning of his words struck me. "This is not appropriate," I hissed, making one last futile attempt to extricate myself. Akela whined sympathetically, and I shot him a glare as Hunt sighed behind me.

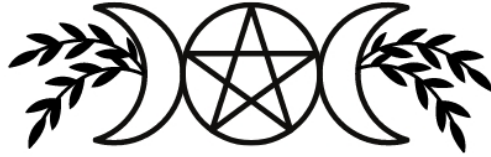
"Go to sleep, and it won't bother you as much," Hunt rumbled, putting a few inches between us as a concession to propriety, but keeping his arm around me. "There, happy?"

"No," I snapped, determined to be ill humored. He chuckled, his breath no longer tickling my ear.

"Go to sleep, Red," he repeated. "You can spend all day tomorrow being angry with me if you like."

"I will," I grumbled, closing my eyes and trying to persuade my body to relax. I heard Hunt breathe out something that sounded a bit like a laugh.

"Looking forward to it."



Chapter 9

After my close call with the leshy, I decided to proceed more carefully the next day, staying close to Hunt and Akela as we made our way through the Bloodwood. Hunt seemed to have the same idea, and he kept glancing back at me periodically to make sure I was following.

The trees seemed to grow thicker the farther we traveled, and we were forced to move more and more slowly, scrabbling over roots and fallen logs every few steps.

Around noon, we arrived at the side of a river and stopped for a short rest. I was exhausted and sweating so much that I had removed my cloak and unbuttoned the top button of my blouse. The rush of the water was strangely relaxing, and I tried to enjoy it, despite the eerie surroundings of the Bloodwood.

“You’re uncharacteristically quiet today,” Hunt said, watching me as he leaned against a tree while I drank as much water as I could stomach from the skin he carried. He looked annoyingly unruffled, not sweating or panting even a little. He was still wearing his dark cloak and carrying all of his weapons. Akela had flopped to the forest floor beside him and was already dozing. I had a feeling the poor wolf had been tasked with keeping watch over me most of the night, and I felt a pang of guilt for the poor creature.

“Just saving my breath for the hike,” I huffed out, taking another sip from the water skin.

“I rather expected you to be biting my head off about last night,” Hunt said wryly, studying me from his perch against the tree. Truthfully, I had slept better than expected with his arm around me, but I wasn’t willing to tell him that.

“How long until we reach the Darklands?” I asked, ignoring his jibe in the hopes that it annoyed him.

Hunt glanced up, possibly to check the positions of the sun. “Depends on how fast we travel today,” he replied. “But at least another day. Probably two at the rate we are going.”

I groaned feelingly and he laughed. It was such a pleasant sound, deep and throaty and rumbling, and I felt annoyed at myself for longing to hear it more.

“Cheer up, Red,” he said, smiling at me with most of his teeth visible beneath his curved lips. “Only two more days until you’re free of me.”

“Yes, so I can walk through demon territory completely unarmed,” I said. “What joy.”

“The demons won’t hurt you,” Hunt said. He was so confident that I raised a brow and looked at him incredulously.

“As long as you don’t hurt them,” he amended, meeting my stare, “they’ll leave you be. They have better things to worry about than a lone witch wandering around.” I let out a snort.

“Like what?” I asked. If my grandmother had been right, we witches were the number one priority of the demons.

“Like earning a living and feeding their families, and Court politics,” Hunt replied, looking steadily at me. “All the same things witches probably worry about.”

“And shadow stones?” I added, looking pointedly at Hunt.

He smirked. “What are you going to do when you get to the Darklands?” he asked curiously, moving to sit next to me on a fallen log. “Where exactly will you go?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said, somewhat truthfully. Mama had told me to find the Demon King, and it wouldn’t be lying to say I didn’t know where he was. “Will you be returning here to the Bloodwood?”

Hunt shrugged noncommittally. “That depends,” he said, looking down to study his hands. They were scarred and calloused, definitely the hands of someone used to hard work.

“Depends on what?” I asked, handing him the water skin. He took a swig before tying it back onto his belt.

“On whether or not we ever make it there,” he said, shooting me a grin and holding out his hand to me as he stood. “Come on, Red, we’re wasting daylight.”

“Ugh,” I groaned, letting him haul me to my feet.

He laughed. "You know, you are the whiniest witch I have ever met," he said, looking down at me with a smirk.

"How many witches have you met?" I asked, putting my hands on my hips and looking up at him with a raised brow.

"Not many," he conceded, leaning down to scratch Akela behind the ears to wake him. "But you're still the worst."

"I'm beyond pleased to disappoint you," I said, picking my way past him to walk toward the bank of the river.

"Who said I'm disappointed?" he asked behind me as he followed. My stomach gave a little lurch at his playful teasing. Before I could overthink it, I stopped and turned back to him.

"Thank you," I said. "For watching out for me."

Hunt raised a brow at me, looking surprised. "You know this isn't charity, Red," he said, looking pointedly at where the necklace lay beneath my blouse.

"I know," I agreed, continuing in a rush, "and I know I'm technically paying you, but it's kind anyway."

Hunt looked at me steadily for a moment, a slight smile curving his lips. "You're welcome, Red," he said.

"Elara," I replied, feeling like if he was going to hurt me, he probably would have done it by now. Giving him my name at this point was probably harmless.

"Elara," he repeated, a look of pleasant surprise on his face. "Pretty. You probably shouldn't give out your name to complete strangers though, no matter how handsome and alluring they are."

I rolled my eyes. "Well now I regret telling you," I joked, turning on my heel and striding toward the river.

He chuckled. "I think I prefer 'Red' anyway," Hunt said, pushing past me with another smirk toward the bank. It hadn't escaped me that he had failed to return the favor of telling me his real name, and I scowled at his back as I followed him.

The river was moving swiftly, and of course there was no bridge to cross. It didn't look very deep, but it would likely be cold and slippery. I shivered, despite being too hot only a moment before.

"Don't," said Hunt, reaching out a hand to stop me from putting my cloak back on. He unclasped his own cloak and folded it neatly. "You're going to want something to be dry when we get to the other side."

I grimaced, folding my cloak and clutching it tightly. That meant we were going to get wet, and I didn't relish the idea of wading knee deep through this river. I hiked up my skirts, trying to hold them and the cloak above the water line.

Hunt raised a brow at me. "Nice ankles," he said with a smirk. "You may as well drop the skirt though. I'm going to need you to hold my hand." I raised a brow skeptically as Hunt held out his hand to me.

"Why exactly do I need to hold your hand?" I asked, still holding my skirts above my knees. He glanced down at my boots and looked up again, with an eye roll.

"You're going to have to trust me on this, Red," he said, still holding his hand out to me. "There are things that live in this river that will be more than happy to sweep you away if you let them."

I bit my lip, taking his hand and he took the first step into the river. Akela padded in beside him, splashing happily like a puppy and soaking Hunt from head to toe. I stifled a laugh as he growled, and Akela let out a merry yip.

"Glad you're enjoying this," Hunt said to the wolf, who lolled his tongue out happily at his master.

The water was like ice, and it quickly rose past my boots and up to my thighs as I sunk in behind Hunt. I shivered, wading heavily through the icy water behind him. His hand still gripped mine, and it seemed to tighten every time I slipped or stumbled.

"Halfway there," he shouted over the rush of water. Akela whined, the water up to his neck as he paddled across the river next to us.

On my next step, my foot stuck. I gasped as I felt something cold and vice-like grip my ankle, like bony fingers. They held fast as I tried to wriggle out of the iron grip, and a bolt of panic struck me as Hunt pulled and I didn't move.

"Something has my ankle," I shouted as he looked at me in annoyance. His expression shifted as he glanced down, growling at the churning water.

"Rusalka," he said, steadying himself in front of me. He handed me his cloak and unsheathed the dagger at his hip. "Stand still, Red."

I did as he asked, having not much other choice. Hunt bent down, kneeling in the water until it was up to his chest. He struck with the dagger, aiming it near my trapped ankle. A gurgling scream floated away down the

river as whatever had grabbed me released its hold. I blanched as I saw the stream of red that flowed behind whatever it was.

“It’s a water demon,” Hunt shouted, wiping the knife off on his trousers and sheathing it again. “They drag their prey into cold water and drown them. Your skin must be visible to them.”

“Well I’m wearing skirts,” I shouted irritably, gesturing to the fabric pooling around me and dragging in the river. “So I’d say that’s likely.”

“More reason to wear pants,” he grinned, starting the trek forward again with slow, careful steps. “Let me know if another one gets you.”

“Just lovely,” I growled, letting him lead me forward. I heard him chuckle darkly as we waded the rest of the way across the river without further incident.

“There,” Hunt said as we reached the opposite bank. Akela gave a huge shake, sending water droplets flying all over us and soaking Hunt again. My laugh quickly became a scream as icy fingers gripped me again, and I crashed backward into the river.

The rusalka had been waiting, and they were completely horrifying. Two of them, green skinned and blue haired, bodies spindly and sharp, gripped my ankles. They dragged me down the river, grinning at me with sharp, bloody teeth as they seemed to cackle. A third appeared, grasping my wrist as I struggled to keep my head above the water. My lungs burned as I took in icy river water. I tried to cough to no avail. I heard distant shouting and howling, but it became harder and harder to concentrate as I struggled to take in a breath.

I kicked out as hard as I could, dislodging the rusalka at my ankles long enough to get my head above water and cough. I saw Akela and Hunt surging toward me as I was pulled back under, the rusalka winding their spindly fingers around me more tightly as they pulled me down. Icy water filled my lungs, and the world began to go black as a strong arm grabbed my waist.

“Don’t you dare drown, Red,” Hunt shouted, pulling me out of the river as Akela growled and tore into the rusalka who held my wrist. The creature screamed as the wolf tore its arm from its body, flinging it back into the icy depths. The two rusalka who had my ankles must have lost their nerve, because I suddenly felt their weight fall away as I was lifted from the water. I coughed, gasping to pull in air as Hunt dragged me to the river bank, Akela whining at me as he followed.

Hunt pulled me far back on the bank of the river as I coughed and spluttered. I was freezing, and I noticed the tips of my fingers were faintly blue, either from the cold or the lack of oxygen. Maybe both.

“Breathe, Red,” Hunt growled, crouching next to me and dripping water onto my face from his soaked hair.

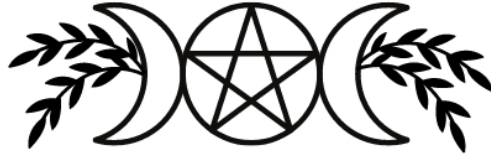
“I’m trying,” I wheezed out, and he rewarded me with a heavy thump on my back. I coughed again, more water leaving my lungs as I started to really feel the cold from the river as the adrenaline of the attack receded.

“Fuck,” Hunt growled, taking off his cloak and wrapping it around me. I realized that my own cloak, and the basket of food and spell supplies, must have been swept away by the river. “You’re freezing.”

I tried and failed to come up with a witty reply, teeth chattering violently as I shivered. With another curse, Hunt scooped me up into his arms as if I weighed nothing and stalked off into the woods again.

“Where are we going?” I asked, shivering too much to care about the indignity of being carried.

“To see the only other witch I know,” he replied.



Chapter 10

I must have dozed off for a while, because when my eyes next opened the sky was much darker. I was still in Hunt's arms as he carried me like a child, wrapped in his cloak that smelled like winter trees.

"You can put me down," I rasped, shivering a bit in his arms.

"No chance," Hunt said, continuing to crash through the trees as his arms tightened to hold me in place. Akela whined a little behind him, and a hoot above me told me that Artemis was nearby too. "You'll slow us down."

"I won't," I protested, feeling awkward and embarrassed that this man, basically a stranger, was carrying me through the forest. "You must be freezing."

"I'm fine," Hunt said, ignoring my continued attempts to free myself. "Besides, we're almost there."

"Almost where?" I asked between chattering teeth.

The trees had begun to thin a little, and I craned my neck to see what we were moving toward. It was the oddest sight I had ever seen. A tiny cottage with a neatly thatched roof sat in a small clearing, surrounded by bright spring flowers and perfectly trimmed hedges. A little cobblestone path led to its door, which had been painted a sky blue. It was so out of place in the middle of the Bloodwood that I let out a snort of laughter.

"Don't let the Hag hear you laughing at her cottage," Hunt said.

"The what?" I asked, still shivering.

"What in the name of the Goddess and the Horned God have you brought to me today, Huntsman?" came an annoyed, ancient sounding voice from the direction of the cottage. Hunt stopped, grimacing a little.

"A witch who needs your help, Hag," he shouted back. I winced.

"That's a horrible name," I hissed, trying to wriggle free of his grasp again as shivers wracked my body.

“She chose it,” he replied with a shrug. “Stop squirming, Red.”

“A witch in the Bloodwood?” came the voice. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once, and I looked around frantically, trying to pinpoint its source. Akela whined next to Hunt, and the ancient voice let out a cackle.

“Bring her inside then, Huntsman,” said the voice. “And ready your payment.”

“What payment?” I hissed, feeling panic rise in me. I had lost my supplies, and I definitely had no gold. And I was so very, very cold.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hunt replied, gruffly. “I’ll pay it.”

I shivered uncomfortably, wishing a painful death on all the rusalka in the Bloodwood as Hunt strode toward the little cottage, ducking his head under the door frame. Clearly this cottage was not made with a man of his height in mind, and he had to stoop as he entered.

“Put her down then,” said the ancient voice, “and let me take a look.”

Hunt finally released me, helping me into a small chair next to a well worn table. The room was tiny, the only other furniture was a moth-eaten mattress that lay by the empty fireplace, and a large pot for cooking. Hunt stepped back, leaning uncomfortably by the door. Akela flopped on the ground by the hearth next to me, growling slightly as if he didn’t trust the house or the voice.

“Well then,” said the ancient voice, which coalesced into the form of a very short, very old woman. She appeared behind Hunt, bustling through the room and poking at jars and boxes as she moved. “Go make yourself useful and fetch some firewood.” She said this while studying me, but Hunt raised a brow, gave Akela a nod, and left through the tiny door.

“Hello,” I said, discomfort rising at the idea of invading this woman’s home. “I am sorry to inconvenience you.”

“Nonsense, nonsense,” said the ancient woman, moving to stand beside me. I tried not to stare at the withered hands that busied themselves with the shawl around her shoulders, the veins protruding in purple streaks against milky skin. Her face was deeply lined and spotted with age. Witches aged slowly, so this woman must be many centuries old. “A friend of the Huntsman’s is a friend of mine. Let me take a look at you.”

The old woman turned milky white eyes on me as she reached her hands out to my face. Akela growled again.

“Oh hush, you beast,” she snapped, hands roaming over my features. She must be totally blind, I realized, but she seemed to study me in a way that didn’t require normal sight.

“I think a magical cure is not strictly necessary,” she said, more to herself than me. “But better safe than sorry, I suppose.” The woman fished in her apron pocket and pulled out a piece of chalk.

“You’re a hedge witch,” I said, surprised that a witch would find herself all alone out here. Hedge witches lived apart from any Coven, and I hadn’t known anyone who had ever chosen to leave. The closest was probably Mama, but even she never took the step of leaving the security of the Coven. The woman barked a laugh, drawing a pentagram on the table in front of me and pulling out flint and candles from her pocket.

“Some would say so,” she agreed, waving her hands nonchalantly over her altar. Fire sprang to life in the hearth, crackling merrily as if it had been burning there all morning. I was used to magic, but the suddenness of this caught me off guard.

“How did you do that?” I asked, feeling myself melt a little as the warmth of the fire seeped into my bones. “You didn’t say the incantation.”

The old woman scoffed. “When you’re as old as I am, you don’t need to verbalize them anymore,” she said, skirting around Akela, who growled again.

“Cursed animal,” she grumbled. “He’s never liked me.”

“How do you know Hunt?” I asked, shooting a warning look at Akela for him to behave. He narrowed his eyes, but stopped growling. I watched curiously as the old woman began pulling bundles of herbs from her pocket. It must be enchanted, because the number of items she kept in there seemed unreal. A stick of cinnamon, a clove of garlic, a tiny bottle from which she took a pinch of what I was sure was cayenne pepper, a ginger root, and a little paper packet from which she drew some turmeric were all positioned at the point of the pentagram.

“We have crossed paths many times,” she said. “Give me your hand.”

I frowned, lifting my hand to the woman. She hissed at the coldness of my skin and mumbled something unintelligible as she placed my hand palm down in the center of the pentagram. Warmth blossomed beneath my palm, traveling from my fingers up my arm to my shoulder, then throughout my whole body. I sighed as the feeling suffused me, chasing away the icy cold of the river.

Hunt returned with firewood at that moment, banging the door open with a rough kick.

“Be careful,” screeched the old woman. “The house is fragile!”

“Apologies,” he said, looking the opposite of apologetic. “You can add it to my tab, if you must.”

“You can be assured that I will,” she said imperiously, releasing my hand from the center of the pentagram. “Take a seat.”

The old woman waved me from the chair, and I stood awkwardly, shuffling around behind Akela to get out of the way while Hunt took my place. He was altogether too large to fit comfortably inside this house, and he looked almost comical sitting in the tiny chair.

“Is this really the best you can do?” he asked, gesturing around the room to the woman. “You have company.” The old woman rolled her eyes and snapped her fingers. I gasped and clutched the wall as the room suddenly stretched and expanded, growing doors and a few extra chairs, as well as a cozy kitchen.

“Better?” the old woman asked, taking a sharp, silver blade and a wooden bowl from her ever expanding pocket.

“How did you...” I trailed off, looking in wonder around at the newly expanded space.

“It’s a glamour,” Hunt said, removing a vambrace and rolling his sleeve up to expose the inside of his forearm. “The Hag here is fond of looking more destitute than she is.”

“A trait we have in common, I think,” said the witch, giving Hunt what a withering look from her sightless eyes. He glared at her as if she could see just fine, and I frowned. She moved the bowl beneath his arm, sitting across from him.

“What are you—” I gasped as the witch sliced Hunt’s arm open, letting his blood dribble into the bowl.

“My services are not free,” the witch said, looking at me with a gleam in her milky eye. “I believe that is another trait the Huntsman and I share in common.” Even though I knew she couldn’t see, it felt like she was looking right at the lump where my necklace lay beneath my blouse.

“You practice blood magic,” I said, tone more accusing than was probably proper for a guest. The old woman laughed.

“Of course I do, girl,” she said, gesturing around the room. “How else could I do all this?”

“Is this why you live out here alone?” I asked, frowning at the blood dribbling from Hunt’s arm. “Were you exiled?”

“I’m sure that’s the story your Crone would tell,” the woman said, pulling empty glass vials from her pocket. “Now get undressed before you undo all of my hard work.”

“What?” I asked, startled by the request.

“Your clothes, girl,” she said impatiently. “If you stay in wet things then all of my healing will be for nothing. There’s a spare shift in that room over there.” She waved her hand toward the newly visible door, and I looked questioningly at Hunt. He nodded toward the door.

“Go on,” he said, watching his blood trickle into the bowl. “This won’t take long.”

Akela went with me, and I found the room sparse, but comfortably appointed with a smallish bed, a plush armchair, and another fireplace. As the old woman had said, there was a plain white nightshift on the bed, and I quickly undressed, peeling off my wet clothes and laying them to dry over the armchair in front of the fire. I tried not to think too hard about the fact that there was a spare shift in my size, or that there was nothing for Hunt to wear.

“This is not how I pictured spending the week before Beltane,” I said to Akela, stroking his furry head as he sidled up next to me. Usually the week before Beltane, or May Day, as the mortals called it, was spent weaving flower garlands and praying to the Goddess and preparing ceremonies. Here I was, traipsing through the woods and nearly being eaten by leshy and rusalka as I ran from my own grandmother for possessing magic I couldn’t understand, or even currently access.

My hair was still wet, and the shift, although modestly cut, was somewhat see-through. I pulled a blanket off the bed to wrap around myself as I padded on bare feet toward the door, which was still open a crack.

“You could have taken care of her yourself,” the woman said, sounding annoyed. I paused at the door, listening in case I could learn something about the huntsman and the hedge witch I now found myself in company with. “Unless you have a reason to hide your nature from the girl?”

“You know my reasons,” Hunt replied. “And I would never give up the pleasure of visiting you.”

“Humph,” the woman replied, the sound of the wooden bowl scraping on the table. Were they done with the blood letting? “She’s an odd little

thing. I suppose that's why you brought her to me."

"You know me well," Hunt said. I heard a chair scrape, and I backed away swiftly from the door, moving to sit by the fire and pretend I hadn't been listening. A few more words were exchanged, which I couldn't hear, and then the door opened. Hunt looked massive in the tiny door frame, and he leaned an arm on the lintel as he peered in at me.

"You can come out now, Red, if you're done eavesdropping," He said, a slight smirk turning up the corners of his mouth.

"I was not eavesdropping," I said indignantly, standing and wrapping the blanket more tightly around me.

"Liar," he said, stepping aside so I could pass through. "You heard every word."

I refused to dignify this with a reply, especially since it wasn't true. I had only heard most of the words. Instead, I looked Hunt up and down, trying to see if there was a cost for the blood he had given. His shirt and vambrace were back in place, and he looked otherwise unbothered.

"Your clothes are dry," I said, frowning at him as I sat at the tiny table.

"Magic is good for that," Hunt replied, taking the chair across from me. "And the Hag here is a bit more adept at it than you seem to be." I scowled at this, earning a chuckle from Hunt in return.

"Why did I have to change, then?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest in annoyance, and to hide behind the sheer fabric.

"Because you didn't pay," Hunt said pointedly, nodding toward his arm.

"Don't take offense, girl," the old woman said, dropping a bowl of something steaming in front of me. I had no idea when she had found the time to cook, but again, her magic was certainly different than mine. "You too may be this capable after a thousand years."

"A thousand years?" I asked, completely incredulous. This witch was ancient. Far older than even those in the Witchlands. "So, you were alive when the witches and demons lived side by side?"

"I was," the witch said, clearly unwilling to elaborate more on her experience. She placed a bowl in front of Hunt and then sat, resting her chin in her hands as if studying me.

"Why did you say I was odd?" I asked, giving up the pretense that I hadn't been listening. The witch's milky eye gleamed in the firelight as she smirked a little.

“I have a strong suspicion you already know,” she said, looking me up and down. “Even he can sense it,” she added, tilting her head toward Hunt.

“Akela sensed it first,” Hunt said, taking a bite of whatever was in the bowl. Since he didn’t fall down dead, I assumed it would be safe enough for me to eat. “I’m certain that’s why he stayed with you. Are you going to tell me why you’re running, yet?”

“No,” I said, taking a bite of what appeared to be some kind of soup. It was thin and runny and rather tasteless, but it was warm, so I ate it. “That’s not part of our bargain.” The old woman cackled as if what I had said was the most amusing thing in the world.

“She’s a sharp one,” the witch said, raising a brow at Hunt. “Be careful with her.” I looked on, confused as the old woman stood.

“You can stay here tonight,” she said, gesturing to the room we were sitting in. “But you’ll be out by morning, or I’ll be having some of her blood too.” She shuffled off toward the room where I had left my things, closing the door behind her.

“My clothes are in there,” I said with a frown, turning to face Hunt. His face had grown contemplative, and he was studying me the way he had on our first night in the woods.

“You’ll just have to travel like that then,” he said, rising and stretching so that his head touched the thatched ceiling. My stomach gave a little lurch as a sliver of tanned skin appeared between the top of his trousers and the bottom of his shirt, and I quickly turned my attention back to my empty bowl, feeling my cheeks heat. He turned back to me with a smirk, making my cheeks grow somehow even warmer.

“What is the...” I paused, looking around the tiny room, “...plan for tonight?” I asked. There was only one small mattress by the hearth, and as much as I had enjoyed Hunt sleeping so close to me the previous night, I didn’t think it was wise for it to become a habit. This—acquaintance? Friendship? Deal?—whatever it was, would end sooner rather than later, and I didn’t want to become attached.

“You take the bed,” Hunt said, either not sensing or not acknowledging my sudden inner turmoil. “I’ll be by the door making sure you don’t run off to befriend any more monsters.”

“The rusalka were not my fault,” I said acerbically, glaring at him from where I still sat.

“The leschy was,” he retorted, sitting on the floor in front of the door. He whistled, and Akela padded over to him, offering him a lick on the jaw before snuggling down next to him. “And I have no desire to go running after you to save you from anything else with large teeth and larger appetites.”

“Running after the necklace you mean,” I said, feeling oddly annoyed at his concern. After all, that’s what this was really about. His payment. Pretending otherwise was foolish.

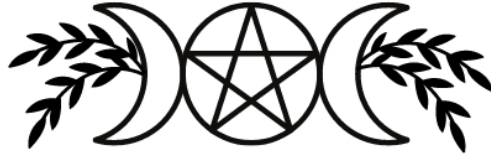
“Of course,” he agreed, leaning his head back against the door and closing his eyes. He sounded suddenly exhausted. “Everything I’ve done, diving into the river after you, bringing you here, stopping you from being eaten, it was all for that. Nothing more.”

I pursed my lips. Was he...hurt? He sounded like he might be.

“I’m sorry,” I said, sounding more defensive than apologetic. “I know I owe you. Again.”

“Hmmm,” he said. His expression cleared and he lifted his head to look at me, a smirk playing at his lips. “If you really want to thank me,” he said, “you’ll share the bed. That looks like a mighty thin nightgown you’re wearing.”

“Ugh, goodnight,” I said, turning as he chuckled darkly behind me.



Chapter 11

After an uncomfortable night on the lumpy mattress, I was feeling extremely irritable. The thing had been filled with spiky straw that had poked me all over, and at one point I almost asked Hunt to swap with me, changing my mind when I considered how much he might make fun of me for it.

On top of that, the magical beasts inside me had been stirring. I felt them coiling around my insides, light and shadow, as if they were rousing from rest. It made me panicky, afraid I might accidentally use my power to hurt Hunt or Akela.

The hedge witch, or the Hag as Hunt had called her, had left my clothes in a neat pile in front of her door, and I dressed quickly under the blankets before Hunt awoke to avoid the embarrassment of asking him to turn around.

I sat on the mattress, studying the huntsman in semi-darkness as I waited for him to wake. His face was more relaxed than usual in sleep, his throat exposed and the strong line of his jaw stark in the early morning light. He was far more pleasing to look at than any of the other mortal men I had met, and I felt myself flush inexplicably as the thought crossed my mind.

As if sensing my attention, Hunt cracked an eye open.

“You’re staring, Red,” he said, giving Akela a scratch on the head to wake him. “Do I have drool on my chin?” He reached up a hand to scrub at his face, and I laughed guiltily, looking around at anything else.

“Do you really think I would tell you, if you did?” I asked, standing and stretching, feeling all of my joints crack at the same time. I winced. Hunt was looking at me with an eyebrow raised.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said, cracking his own neck as he pushed Akela off him to stand. The wolf whined in protest, curling back up into a fuzzy ball. “Lazy creature,” Hunt mumbled.

A screech at the window made us both turn. Artemis was perched there, her bat-like wings splayed out, and she had a small, furry creature in her mouth. She hopped down from the sill, landing to perch in front of me, where she proudly presented the dead mouse.

“Traitor,” Hunt grumbled. “She used to bring me presents in the morning.”

“Oh, is this a...present?” I asked, trying my best not to wince and insult the creature. “Thank you. You can have it for your breakfast though.” The strix cooed, as if to lament at the pickiness of witches, and snatched up the mouse. She swallowed it in a single gulp.

“I’m suddenly no longer hungry for breakfast,” I said, grimacing at the strix, who hooted happily and hopped up to perch on Hunt’s shoulder. He laughed and gave her feathery stomach a gentle stroke, and she hooted again, flapping out the window.

“I don’t know how you’ve managed to enchant my beasts, Red,” he said, giving me a sardonic frown as Akela padded over to me for pets. “But they’re not part of the bargain.” He looked at me like I was something of a puzzle, and I wasn’t really sure what to do with that.

“Shame,” I said, leaning down to cup Akela’s huge furry face in my hands and scratch his jaw. “This one is so loveable.” Hunt rolled his eyes, pushing open the cottage door. The sight of the Bloodwood beyond the spring-enchanted cottage sobered me, and I moved to join him.

“How far?” I asked, following his gaze to the path we would be taking.

“Two more days, I think,” he said, looking down at me with a smirk. “Maybe less, depending on how many new friends you make us along the way. We should arrive in the Darklands on Beltane.”

My stomach lurched a little. I had forgotten about Beltane, and the fact that Mama, if she was even safe, would be celebrating it alone. I had told Vera I would visit her after Beltane as well. I supposed that would never happen now.

“What’s wrong?” Hunt asked, frowning at me.

“Nothing,” I said. “Just...” I trailed off, trying to decide how much to tell him. He already knew about Mama, so I supposed that was safe enough. “I usually went to the May Day festival with Mama on Beltane,” I said,

remembering her excitement for the holiday. Beltane represented the beginning of summer and was one of the major witch celebrations held throughout the year. While witches celebrated with a bonfire and ceremonies for the Goddess, the mortals celebrated with feasting and dancing around an intricately painted maypole. It was one of my favorite holidays, and this would be the first time I didn't celebrate it with Mama.

"You miss her," Hunt said, a statement rather than a question. I nodded.

"She sent me away for my safety," I said. "I know that. But I'm angry with her for keeping things from me. For not explaining."

"What things?" Hunt asked, sounding genuinely interested. I looked up at him, and he met my eyes. He seemed sincere, not smirking or joking or poking fun. I smiled faintly.

"Things I can't tell anyone," I said with a sigh, looking away as those curling beasts in me roused a little more.

"I'd keep your secrets, Red," he said, raising his hand to my face. He cupped my chin gently in his fingers, lifting my eyes to meet his. The gesture was unexpected and somehow intimate.

"Why?" I asked quietly. "You don't even know me."

He frowned, shrugging. "I don't really know," he said, brows furrowing a little as he studied my face. "I guess I just find you..."

"Interesting?" I finished, giving him a small smile. He laughed, a deep vibration running through his fingers into me. It was a nice sound, and I hoped I would hear more of it.

"Something like that," he agreed, giving me a genuine smile now. It lit his eyes a mossy green, and my stupid stomach gave a little flip.

Somehow, he made me want to tell him everything, and I wondered what it was that made me trust him. He had saved me from peril, sure, but it felt like more than that. Maybe it was the fact that I wasn't really close to that many people. Or maybe it was that he was slowly and steadily tearing down the walls I kept around myself.

I bit my bottom lip to keep my secrets in, shaking my head and drawing his hand away from my chin. For a moment, he held my fingers as if wanting to protest further. His fingers were warm and calloused, and I was strangely disappointed when he sighed and lowered his hand, flexing his fingers a little as he released me.

“Let’s move,” Hunt said, the gentleness and warmth gone from his voice. He strode off into the wood, and Akela nudged my hip as if encouraging me to follow. I sighed, lamenting the loss of the moment of truce we had just carved for ourselves as I trudged after him.

He was silent for a long time, barreling his way through the trees in front of me, slashing at roots and branches that got in his way. I trudged after him in silence for a while, trying to lull the magic inside me back to sleep. Eventually, I got bored of the silence.

“What will that witch do with your blood?” I asked, panting a bit as I worked to keep up with him.

“Magic,” he replied darkly, not looking back at me as he pounded on ahead. He seemed angry, but I didn’t think his anger was justified, just because I had chosen not to confide in him.

“What kind of magic?” I asked. Blood magic was forbidden in the Witchlands. It came too close to demon magic, as it could be cast with very little consequence to the user. Only the blood giver paid a price and, in eons past, this had been death.

“Blood magic,” Hunt replied again, finally slowing his pace so I could catch up. He smirked at me, as if intending to annoy me with his obtuse answers.

“I know that,” I snapped, scowling at him. I missed having the cover of a hood to hide beneath. I felt very exposed like this, with his eyes intent upon me. “I mean what kind of blood magic uses mortal blood?”

“Not many,” Hunt said, hopping over the roots on the floor of the woodlands as nimbly as a cat. “Witches who practiced primarily used demon blood in the past.”

“Really?” I asked, shocked by this answer. “Is that why the witches and demons are still at war? Why they created the Bloodwood?” Hunt shrugged noncommittally.

“I’m sure that’s part of it,” he said. “There’s a lot of history even I don’t know.”

“You mean your demonic knowledge has finally failed you?” I gasped, feigning shock. Hunt chuckled, and I felt inordinately pleased at having lifted him from his anger. “At least you can tell me how you met the hedge witch.”

“It’s a long story,” Hunt sighed.

“We have a long walk,” I said, nudging him with my shoulder. He looked down at me with a frown.

“Why do you believe you’re entitled to my secrets all of a sudden, Red?” he asked. He still sounded amused, not annoyed, and in a moment of daring, I decided to push my limit.

“How about a truth for a truth,” I suggested, almost tripping on a root. Hunt caught me before I fell, pulling me upright by the arm without breaking his pace. “You can choose what secret to tell, and I’ll tell you one in return.”

Hunt raised his brow. “There have to be rules,” he said, shooting me another frown. “The secrets have to be of the same level of importance. I don’t want to tell you I’m fabulously wealthy and important, only for you to respond with something like not enjoying sardines.”

I laughed. “Agreed,” I said. “I’ll even go first in a show of good faith.”

“Fine,” he agreed, continuing to hike at a pace that was slower than he could move, but still quick for me. “But make it a good one.”

“Hmm,” I said, making a show of thinking. I felt myself flush at what I had settled on, but I was feeling oddly reckless, and I was curious what Hunt would say. Vera would tell me I was fishing, and maybe I was a little. “I have never kissed a man.”

Hunt snorted. “This isn’t ‘a lie for a lie,’ Red,” he said, looking me up and down appraisingly.

I flushed. “What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked indignantly.

“I mean, look at you,” he said, gesturing to, well, all of me. “You’re... fine looking.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly, an eyebrow raised at him.

He rolled his eyes. “I mean, are you really telling me that no mortal boy ever looked at you and thought ‘there’s a witch I’d like to tumble’?” I wrinkled my nose in a show of distaste, but I felt secretly thrilled that he was surprised.

“I can’t speak for the mortal boys,” I said, cheeks flushing under his stare, “but I have never found one I was interested in.”

“Are you blushing?” he asked, laughing. “Regretting your suggestion that we play this game?”

“Not at all,” I said firmly. “It’s your turn.”

“Fine,” he said. “I’m fabulously wealthy and important.”

“Now who’s lying?” I asked irritably.

Hunt laughed. "I swear it on the Horned God himself," he replied, lifting a hand over his heart. "You cannot fathom the level of wealth I possess."

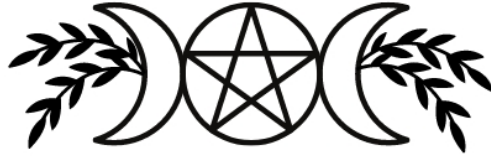
"If we're playing the lying game," I said angrily, berating myself for trusting him, "then I should tell you that I find you extremely charming."

Hunt barked a laugh, his eyes flashing brightly at me. "And you're a peach, yourself," he replied, giving me a smirk.

"I hate you," I grumbled. Akela whined as if unhappy that we were arguing.

"Now that one for sure was a lie," Hunt said smugly, raising a mocking brow at me.

I spent the rest of the day stomping and tripping through the Bloodwood in irritable silence, cursing myself for telling him anything true at all.



Chapter 12

Even though my supplies had been lost to the river, Hunt still had a flint on him, and I was able to draw a pentagram in the soft ground to cast a fire. He seemed fascinated by my magic, but I supposed he had rarely seen a witch work a spell, other than the Hag.

“You’re going to have to talk to me at some point,” Hunt said, pushing a skewer of rabbit toward me.

I scowled at him, biting into the meat and imagining it was his arm instead.

He laughed. “You’re a violent little witch, aren’t you?” he asked, leaning back and stretching out his long legs. “What if I tell you a real secret then? Will you forgive me?”

“Maybe,” I said, trying to look haughty as I wiped the grease from my face.

He smiled faintly. “I have never been in love,” he said somberly. “There, is that sufficient repayment for your truth?”

I shrugged. “I suppose,” I said. “Although it’s really not much of a surprise. You’re fairly young and very annoying.”

He laughed. “I’m older than I look,” he said, raising a sardonic brow.

“How old?” I asked, curious. He looked to be maybe in his mid- to late twenties, not much older than I was.

“You first,” Hunt said, swigging from his water skin before passing it to me. I took a drink, feeling like there wasn’t enough water in the world to quench my thirst from all the hiking.

“I’m twenty-five,” I said with a shrug, handing him back the water.

He raised his brows at me in surprise. “Really?” he asked. “I thought you were much younger.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, irritation rising. Hunt shrugged, smirking a little.

"You just seem very..." he paused, considering his next word.

"Interesting?" I cut in.

"Sheltered," he amended. "It explains a lot, actually."

I chose to ignore this comment. "You met me on my birthday," I added, not sure why I was telling him this.

"I did?" he asked, frowning. "You fled for your life on your birthday?"

"It's a long story," I said.

"We have a long walk," he replied, still smirking at me. My stomach did a little flip as he echoed my own words back at me, and I felt myself flush.

"You still haven't told me about the hedge witch," I countered.

"Hmm," he said, "I see you haven't learned your lesson about the game of truths." I rolled my eyes, feeling my irritation rising.

"Fine," I said icily, trying to channel how Mama acted around my grandmother. "You were the one who wanted me to talk to you, but I'm happy to return to silence."

"I'm *teasing*, Red," Hunt said, rolling his eyes dramatically. He leaned forward, flicking my braid from my shoulder. "A truth for a truth. For real this time."

I pursed my lips, trying to scowl harder than I had ever scowled. I was annoyed when he laughed.

"I'll even go first," he said, stamping out the fire and plunging us into darkness. "Here."

"Here what?" I asked, unable to make out much as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. I heard him shift and felt him reach for my hand.

"You've no cloak, and no fire," he said impatiently, as if annoyed that I hadn't read his mind. "Come here so you don't freeze, and I'll tell you the damn story."

"Fine," I said suspiciously, letting him take my hand. He pulled me toward him, and I shifted ungracefully until I was sitting next to him, back propped against a tree. I felt him reach his arm around me, and I stiffened.

"Relax, Red," he said, as if trying to soothe a frightened animal. "It doesn't serve my purposes for you to freeze. I won't do anything ungentlemanly."

"I'll make Akela bite you if you do," I promised, letting him settle me beneath his cloak. It was warm, and the scent of evergreens enveloped me. I

had to remind myself that his kindness meant nothing, beyond fulfilling our deal.

“Better?” He asked, settling his arm more firmly around my shoulders. I nodded, feeling embarrassed and uncertain. This was the closest I had ever been to a man, and Akela’s warm weight settling on my knee did nothing to reassure me.

“You really haven’t been with anyone, have you?” Hunt asked, his voice an odd mix of teasing and surprise.

“I told you I hadn’t,” I said, annoyed that he truly hadn’t believed me.

“I officially believe you,” he said, his voice a rumble next to me. “Do you still want to know about the Hag?”

I nodded, giving Akela a scratch on the head for comfort. Artemis was nowhere in sight, but Hunt had repeatedly reassured me that she could fend for herself.

“It was my first trip into the Bloodwood, actually,” Hunt said. He sounded like he was speaking of a time long ago, and again I wondered how old he was. “I was badly injured and stumbled upon her cottage. She found me and fixed me up.”

“And then bled you?” I asked.

Hunt chuckled, squeezing his arm around me unconsciously. “Not that first time,” he said. I looked up as I saw him staring ahead into the trees, his profile faintly visible in the waning moonlight. “She didn’t start charging me until I came back asking for magical favors.”

“Why were you injured?” I asked, trying to imagine a younger version of Hunt. Whatever it was must have been powerful to injure him gravely enough that he would need magical help. He seemed practically invincible, although I knew as a mortal he was not.

“It was Akela, actually,” he said, reaching over my leg to give the wolf a scratch on the head. Akela whined apologetically. “It was a rite, upon coming of age, to tame a wild beast,” he continued, still stroking the wolf. “Akela didn’t make it easy for me.”

“What kind of rite is that?” I asked, horrified that parents would send their children out into the Bloodwood to be mauled by hungry beasts. “It sounds barbaric.”

“It is,” Hunt agreed. “It’s rarely practiced anymore.”

“You never told me how old you are,” I said, stifling a yawn and trying to sound accusing. “You speak as if this were centuries ago, but you can’t

be that much older than I am.”

Hunt chuckled. “You’ll have to give me another truth to earn that secret,” Hunt said, giving me another squeeze. I didn’t think it was unconscious this time. “Go to sleep, Red. You sound exhausted.”

“I’m not sure I can,” I said, wiggling to try to get comfortable.

“Put your head here,” Hunt said, patting the crook of his shoulder with his free hand. “I don’t mind.”

“Okay,” I said, hesitantly. “But wake me when you need to sleep.” Hunt nodded, and I rested my head on his shoulder. It felt strange and nice, and I willed myself not to look into it too much. Hunt wrapped the cloak a little more tightly around me as I began to drift off.

“Sleep well, Red.”

I woke first again, rubbing my eyes as I tried to recall where I was. My head was still on Hunt’s shoulder. More like his chest really, as we seemed to have slid down the trunk of the tree in the night. I craned my neck to look up and saw that he was asleep still, his head tilted back on the tree trunk and his throat bared to the forest. His neck and jaw were covered in short, dark stubble, and I had to resist the urge to reach up and run my hand over it.

Akela huffed, and I looked over at him. He was an expressive creature, and he looked at me with pricked ears and wide eyes, as if to ask me what in the name of the Goddess I thought I was doing with his master.

“Ugh, I don’t know, Akela,” I whispered, closing my eyes and laying my head back against Hunt again. “What should I be doing?”

“Sleeping,” came a rough reply from above me. I flushed, looking up to see Hunt with one eye cracked open. “Why are you talking to my wolf at the crack of dawn?”

“He doesn’t approve,” I said, reaching up to scratch Akela behind the ears.

“Of what?” Hunt asked groggily, reaching his free hand up to scrub over his stubbly jaw.

“Of me sleeping against you, I think,” I said, giving Akela a contemplative look as he studied me back. He let out a disagreeing howl, then reached forward to press his wet nose to mine.

“Ugh,” I said with a laugh, sitting up and wiping the moisture off my face. “See?”

“I think that means he does approve,” Hunt said. I looked back to see him giving his wolf a sardonic look. “Meddlesome beast.”

I laughed. “He’s not meddlesome,” I said, running my hand behind his ears again and earning another lick on my cheek. “He’s lovely.”

“Agree to disagree,” Hunt said, leaning forward to scratch Akela’s ears as well. Our hands met on his fuzzy head, and I turned a little, catching Hunt smiling faintly at me before he turned to stand.

Curse my heart and my lack of experience and the fact that Hunt somehow always looked good, even after sleeping against a tree. I willed my heartbeat to slow as I rose as well. Clearly, I was attracted to Hunt. There was no point in denying it. But nothing could come of it, I told myself. And he was irritating. And kind. And annoying. I gave myself a little mental shake, pushing the internal war out of my mind.

Artemis was kind enough to help with this, swooping low with a hoot and dropping another dead mouse in front of me. I shrieked in surprise, and a laugh burst from Hunt. Artemis hooted angrily, clearly offended by my rejection of her gift.

“I’m sorry,” I called after her. “You surprised me.”

“Your face was priceless,” Hunt said, still chuckling as he kicked the dead mouse to the side of our little camp, pushing leaves on top of it with the toe of his boot. “I hope Artemis brings you more presents.”

“Please tell me I won’t have many more mornings with her,” I said, turning plaintive eyes on the huntsman.

He smirked, but the smile didn’t really reach his eyes. “One more, if we make good time today,” he said, glancing up at the sky. I assumed he was gauging the position of the sun when he did this, but it annoyed me that he looked damn good while doing it.

Get it together, Elara.

“Better get moving then,” I said briskly, putting my hands on my hips. “Lead the way.”

“What exactly are you going to do when you reach the Darklands?” Hunt asked as he barreled off into the trees. “Have you even got a plan?”

“I have a plan,” I said, more confidently than I felt. Finding the Demon King technically *was* a plan, even if it was a vague one.

“Does this plan involve befriending creatures that will eat you?” Hunt asked, glancing back at me over his shoulder.

“What does it matter to you?” I asked, genuinely confused. “You will be long gone, yes?”

“It matters to me,” Hunt said, sounding a little defensive.

“Because I’m so interesting?” I quipped, stumbling over the uneven ground after him.

“Because I’m invested,” he corrected, reaching back in time to catch me before I fell face first on the forest floor. He gripped my hand and waist firmly as he raised me back to my feet. “You are the clumsiest witch I’ve ever met.”

“I thought you only knew two witches,” I said, looking up at him a little breathlessly. The hood had fallen back from his face, and I could see his hair, the short side close to the scalp. The longer side looked silky, and I had to resist the urge to reach up and touch it.

“I do,” he said, still gripping my waist in one hand as he moved the other to my arm. “And you’re the clumsiest.” He smirked down at me, and my heart tripped a little as we stood there. Something heated flashed in his eyes, just for a moment.

“Listen, Red,” he said, taking a deep breath. Whatever he was going to say didn’t come, as an unearthly scream rent the air, shattering the peace we had been standing in. That dark thing inside of me fully awoke, alert to the danger.

“Fuck,” Hunt snarled, pulling his bow from his back and nocking an arrow. “Get behind me.”

Akela growled, prowling in front of me next to Hunt, and the two stood side by side, poised to attack whatever came out from the trees. A wailing moan came from the trees that chilled me to my core. I had heard that cry before.

“Leshy,” growled Hunt. “They’ve probably been tracking us since that first night.” He turned to me, giving me an appraising look.

“Please tell me you can climb,” he said, pushing me toward the nearest tree.

“I don’t know,” I said, panic rising as the howls grew nearer. “I’ve never had to.”

“Of course not,” Hunt grunted, dropping his bow and taking a knee. “Perfect time to learn.” He clasped his hands to form a step, nodding to my boot.

“Push with your legs,” he said. I placed my boot in his clasped hands and gasped as he lifted me with more force than I thought possible. I scrabbled up the tree, clinging to the bark with my nails while seeking purchase on a nearby branch.

“Move!” Hunt shouted, loosing an arrow below me as I began an agonizingly slow climb. The trees were spindly and the branches bare, but I was able to find enough of a foothold to boost myself higher. I was slow, and my nails caught and tore on the trunk as I tried to pull myself up.

“Push with your legs, Red,” Hunt growled below me. “Your arms won’t hold your weight.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I snapped at him, trying to follow the advice. He was right—it was far easier to push with my legs. But I would die before telling him so. A smack on my rear made me gasp, and I scrabbled to climb higher.

“Faster, Red,” Hunt shouted over the sounds of wailing moans that grew louder each second. Akela was growling below us, and a cracking and crunching told me that something large was coming through the forest toward us.

I estimated I was about twenty feet up when I ran out of branches to boost myself higher. I clung to the trunk like a barnacle, holding tight with my nails digging into the wood. Hunt swung out onto a branch below me like he had been born climbing trees, and he leveled his bow at the shaking trees before us.

I had spent some time imagining what leshy might look like since the night Hunt had stopped me from going after one, but my imagination had not done the creature justice. Being forest spirits, I assumed they would be tree-like in some way. I was very, very wrong.

Three huge, lumbering forms appeared from the woods, skin pale and gray and sickly. They stood at least seven feet tall, their faces obscured by what looked to be the skulls of some huge, antlered beasts. They appeared eyeless, the black sockets of the skulls giving way to nothing, and the blunted teeth of their heads were bloody. Two pale antlers protruded from each of their heads, resembling branches of the Bloodwood trees or some

unearthly deer. The creatures made a sucking hissing noise that chilled me to my core.

Akela attacked, growling fiercely as he went for the closest creature's throat. Hunt began loosing arrows on the leshy, and a screech told me that Artemis was around. I saw her dive for one of the creatures, pecking at its eyeless features as the thing writhed and screamed in pain.

"Don't look, Red," Hunt shouted from below me. For once, I didn't argue, turning my face away and squeezing my eyes shut against the horrible sounds of wailing and screaming and flesh tearing and arrows finding their marks. The shadowy magic was practically vibrating in my chest, aching to destroy whatever threatened me. I tamped it down and clung to the tree trunk.

I heard cracking and stumbling and a vicious growl from Akela. A loud thump told me one creature had fallen. A yelp and a high pitched whine made me flinch, as something hit the tree hard, shaking me where I perched. Hunt swore, firing more arrows, and another creature screamed, a loud thunk shaking the forest as it hit the ground. The sounds of cracking trees told me the third creature must be retreating. As suddenly as the attack had begun, it was over.

"Shit," said Hunt below me, sliding down the trunk of the tree. I opened my eyes and looked down. Akela was lying still, body crumpled at the base of the tree.

I picked my way down slowly, panic making me slip and slide and almost fall more than once. I was shaking, and I was terrified of what I would find when I made it down the tree.

Hunt was crouched over Akela, a large hand on his face stroking gently. His muzzle was bloody, a huge gash across one eye blinding the loyal creature, and blood dribbled from his jaw in a steady stream.

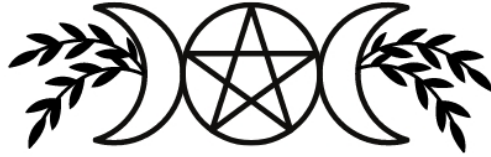
"Oh no," I breathed. Akela let out a faint, pathetic whine as I crouched down next to him, searching inside me for the magic I had inadvertently drawn on the night I had saved the child. I hadn't used it since accidentally healing my arm, and the bright creature inside me was still sleepy and dozing, but I refused to allow Akela to die.

"You'll be okay," I whispered, putting my hands on the wolf and silently praying to the Goddess to save my friend and guardian, trying to shake that silvery magic awake and make it do my bidding. Akela let out a rasping breath, and his chest stopped moving.

“Red,” Hunt croaked out, reaching to cover my hands with his. They were covered in Akela’s blood, and I shook my head fiercely as a tear escaped, tugging on the bright magic to move faster.

“Just wait,” I snapped, looking up at his somber face. I looked back down, trying to focus on the magic; to focus on that bright thing that felt like warmth and light and life. Akela whined as I felt him take a deep breath.

“Holy shit,” Hunt said, staring at me wide eyed. “That is not witch magic. What the fuck are you, Red?”



Chapter 13

Akela whined again as I struggled to find the words to explain.

“Well?” Hunt asked, glaring at me from across Akela, who was still lying where he had fallen. His breathing had become steadier, and he whined again, moving his head slightly as if in search of someone to scratch it. I didn’t dare oblige when Hunt was looking at me like I might attack him.

“It’s why I had to run,” I choked out finally, scooting back a foot to give him some space to process. “On the night of my birthday, I used it to save a child. It was an accident. I didn’t know I could do it. My mother told me I had to run.”

“Run from what?” Hunt asked, uncapping his waterskin and bringing the spout to Akela. The wolf drank, and Hunt poured the rest of the water over his bloody hands, wiping them on his trousers. He was glaring at me as if I had lied to him, which I technically had, I supposed.

“The Crone,” I said, deciding it would be best not to mention I was her granddaughter on top of everything else. “Mama said I was cursed and blessed with life and death. It’s why she sent me to the Darklands, I think. So I can try to break the curse.”

“Holy shit,” Hunt murmured, scrubbing a hand over his jaw and looking at me in bewilderment. Something like realization seemed to strike him, but he didn’t share whatever he had just discovered.

“Well that certainly is a neat trick,” he said, scratching Akela’s ears. The wolf whined pathetically, and Hunt chuckled, lifting the animal up over his shoulder to carry him like a child who was too tired to walk. “Coming, Red?”

“That’s it?” I asked, shocked that Hunt hadn’t run far, far away from me already. “Just ‘neat trick, let’s go’?”

Hunt shrugged. "You saved Akela," he said seriously, looking down at me where I still sat. "I owe you a life debt for it."

"So you're still going to take me to the Darklands?" I asked, standing slowly and taking a step toward the pair. A hoot in the distance told me that Artemis had already taken off, and I sighed in relief that she was okay too.

"I promised to take you where you need to go," Hunt said patiently, as if I were a child arguing with him about eating my vegetables. "Can you do any other magic, besides the healing?"

"I managed to rot an apple on my first day," I confessed, feeling sheepish about it. Hunt raised a brow skeptically, and I continued, "But I haven't been able to do it since."

Hunt pursed his lips, looking thoughtful, before nodding decidedly.

"Then let's go," he said, turning back in the direction we had been heading before the leshy attack.

"Seriously?" I asked, jogging to catch up with him. My skirts were in terrible shape from all the hiking through the forest, and I had never been more envious of men's trousers. "I just brought your pet back to life and you don't have any more questions?"

"Oh, I do," Hunt said, turning to look at me over Akela's legs. "But I work for demons, remember? I've seen this kind of magic before."

"Really?" I asked. "Is life and death magic common?"

"No," he said, hesitating as if deciding how much to divulge. "But I've seen it used before."

"Mama called it a gift," I said darkly.

"You don't agree?" Hunt asked, looking down at me. "You just brought my best friend back from the dead. Seems like a gift to me."

"Your best friend is a wolf?" I asked.

"That's beside the point," Hunt growled. "I'm with your mother on this one."

"Yes, but it feels..." I hesitated, throwing my hands up in frustration, "unnatural."

"If it's demon magic," Hunt said slowly, as if pondering the way the blessing or curse or whatever it was might work, "then it's probably instinctual, not unnatural. Demon magic is as much a gift from the gods as witch magic, there are just no incantations or pentagrams or any of your witch rituals to make it work. You wanted Akela to live, so you made it happen."

“That makes no sense to me,” I said, my logical witchy mind needing spells and altars and ceremony to make sense of magic. “And it’s terrifying. There’s no balance!”

“Balance?” Hunt asked, raising a brow at me.

“A give and take,” I clarified. “All witch magic has a cost, so the Goddess can keep the balance between life and death. There is no cost to this magic.”

“I think you’ll find that there is,” Hunt said, still looking at me appraisingly. “But only an expert will be able to tell you for sure.”

“So who is an expert on demon magic?” I asked, looking up to check on Akela. He had dozed off and was snuggling sweetly, like a giant furry baby.

“Probably the Demon King,” Hunt said with a shrug. “Or one of his scholars.” I sighed, feeling at least a little vindicated that I was going in the right direction.

“Who is the Horned God?” I asked suddenly, remembering that Hunt had never answered this question. Mama had told me to invoke the God’s protection, but I still had no idea who he was.

“He is one of the gods that demons revere,” Hunt said. “The partner of the Triple Goddess.”

“Partner?” I asked, sounding skeptical.

Hunt grinned wickedly. “Lover,” he clarified. “Consort. Husband. Mate.”

“Okay, I get it,” I said, scrunching my nose in distaste. “I have never heard of this Horned God.”

“I forgot,” Hunt said. He didn’t even seem winded while carrying the giant prone wolf, and I was already huffing and puffing trying to keep up. “I’m guessing witches stopped worshiping the Horned God when they divided the realms.”

“You mean when the demons divided the realms?” I clarified. Hunt let out an unamused laugh.

“Sure,” he said. “If that’s what you want to believe.”

“What does *that* mean?” I asked irritably.

“Look, Red,” Hunt said, stopping to turn and frown down at me. “There’s clearly a lot you don’t know about the history between demons and witches, and I get that you want answers. But I’ve had a very long

morning and I just watched my best friend die and come back to life. Could you maybe save your thousands of questions for when we stop?"

I pursed my lips. Truthfully, Hunt did look tired, and he was probably shaken from losing Akela and from me revealing my magic.

I sighed. "Fine," I said. "But you owe me a truth."

"And how is that?" Hunt asked, exasperated.

"I showed you my demon magic," I said simply. "That was the biggest secret I had. So think of a good one." I gave him a smirk and continued on the course he had set, hoping we would reach the border of the Bloodwood before nightfall.

The Goddess must have been smiling down on me, because we reached the edge of the Bloodwood as the sun was setting.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting when we reached the Darklands. Maybe a wall, or some pillars, or a twisted, blackened gate. I expected at least something that announced our arrival. I did not expect to find a quaint village, and houses with neatly thatched roofs scattered around a little square, with a fountain tinkling at its center.

It was the eve before Beltane, and flower garlands already decorated the little houses and shops, dressing everything in pastel hues. I looked around, utterly bewildered.

"This is the Darklands?" I asked, searching for the Demons or the pyres or the pits of fire mortals were burned in. "It looks so..."

"Normal?" Hunt asked, smirking at me. "I told you, you've been lied to about a lot of things."

In the distance, mountains rose up over the horizon, white peaks capped with snow. They seemed to stretch across the land, and I wondered if that was the edge of the Darklands.

"There are no demons here," I said, looking around at the few people still milling about in the dying light of the day.

"No, there are a few," Hunt said, looking at me skeptically. "But they look like mortals most of the time."

"Most of the time?" I asked.

“Demons tend to glamour themselves around mortals,” Hunt said, looking down at me. “As much as I’d love to satisfy your curiosity about all things demonic, Red, I’m afraid you will need to get your demon wisdom from someone else.” Hunt put Akela down carefully, and the wolf prowled to my side, pressing his head against my waist.

Hunt turned back to me with his hand out. “Our deal is up,” he said. “We have officially reached the Darklands, and I would like my payment now.”

“Ah,” I said, feeling my stomach knot with anxiety at what I knew would come next. “About that.”

“You made a blood bargain, Red,” Hunt said, voice full of warning and hand still open expectantly. “Don’t try to break it.”

“I did make a blood bargain,” I agreed, taking a step away from Hunt lest he lose his temper more explosively than I expected. “I agreed to hand over the necklace when you escorted me to *where I needed to go*.”

“Yes,” Hunt said, lowering his hand into a fist. “You said the Darklands.”

“Technically, I didn’t name any place specifically,” I corrected. Hunt’s scowl darkened like storm clouds had rolled across his eyes. “Where I *need to go* is to find the Demon King.”

“Excuse me?” Hunt growled, brows furrowing and eyes flashing a deep, forest green. I took another step back.

“Mama told me to seek the Demon King. To say that I invoke the protection of the Horned God,” I said, watching cautiously as Hunt’s brows snapped up in surprise. He took a step back, as if I had struck him with a physical blow, and I winced, regretting that it had to be this way.

“So,” I continued, trying to maintain the semblance of cool, clear indifference, “unless you wish to accompany me further, it’s in your best interest to let me keep the necklace and dissolve the blood oath.”

“You little cheat,” Hunt growled, taking a step toward me. Akela whined a little, padding over to me and nosing my hand until I placed it on top of his head. “You too,” Hunt growled at the wolf.

“I’m sorry, truly I am,” I said, willing Hunt to understand. “But it’s Mama’s necklace. It’s all she has left of my father, and all I have of her.”

“Then it’s a shame you bargained it away,” Hunt growled again, taking another step toward me.

My blood heated, anger surging through me at his inability or unwillingness to let this go.

"Maybe you misheard me," I said slowly, biting out each word. "But you haven't fulfilled the bargain. The necklace isn't yours."

"And maybe *you* misheard *me*," Hunt said, closing the distance between us. He towered over me, and I think he expected me to cower. I tried to draw strength from Akela and stood as tall as I could. "But blood bargains are binding. So it looks like you're stuck with me, Red."

"What?" I asked, taking another step back to put some distance between us. I felt like I couldn't breathe properly when Hunt towered over me, and I needed my wits about me for this.

"You're stuck with me," Hunt repeated slowly. "Until you reach the Demon King, you're not leaving my sight."

"You cannot want the necklace this badly," I exclaimed as Hunt closed the distance between us again. "There must be other shadow stones."

"There are," Hunt agreed. "But I want this one." He reached out and ran a thumb over the stone, which had slipped out from beneath my shirt. He tugged, pulling me a little closer to him as he added with a growl, "so no more tricks, witch."

"Fine," I said, irritation growing each moment I stayed in his presence. "But get ready for the most annoying walk of your life."

Hunt laughed. "I'm already there, witch," Hunt bit out. He was breathing hard and he looked furious. I felt a little guilty for tricking him, but it served him right for trying to take Mama's necklace. With a roar of frustration, he stalked off toward the little village.

"Where are you going?" I shouted. Akela whined next to me, and I patted his furry head.

"To find us a place to sleep," Hunt roared back at me. His anger was almost funny, and I had to bite my lip to stop from laughing at him and making everything so much worse.

"He'll come round, won't he?" I asked, scratching Akela's neck. He whined piteously, as if aggrieved that we were fighting, and regretting his choice to side with me. I sighed.

"Sorry," I said to the wolf, still scratching him somewhat absently. "I didn't have a choice." Akela whined again, leaning forward to lick my cheek.

“Thanks,” I said, giving him one last pat. I stood, and walked toward the tiny village. It appeared to be very much like the mortal village back home, but cleaner and well kept. The few people I saw seemed happy enough, although I really couldn’t tell who was a demon and who wasn’t.

“Miss, do you need some help?” asked an older man. I assumed he was mortal based on the fact that he looked older, and I knew demons aged slowly. He was carrying a sack of flour and looking at me quizzically.

“She’s with me,” Hunt growled, emerging from a small building and glaring at me angrily.

“Ah, my Lord?” asked the man, beaming suddenly. I frowned, mouthing, “my Lord?” at Hunt. “Is that you? It has been an age since you were here last.”

“It has, Lyle,” he said, taking a breath and turning a warm smile on the man. He took my arm, perhaps a little more roughly than was necessary, and bowed to the old man. “If you’ll excuse us.”

“Will you be staying for the festivities tomorrow, my Lord?” Lyle shouted after us. “It’s going to be a May Day to remember!”

“Perhaps,” Hunt shouted back.

“My Lord?” I asked, looking up at him in surprise.

“I told you I was fabulously wealthy and important,” he replied, giving me a dark look as he narrowed his eyes at me.

“I thought you were joking,” I said, as he opened the door to the small building and guided me inside.

“Ah, the room’s all ready, my Lord,” said a plump woman as we entered. “Third door on the right.”

“Thanks, Molly,” Hunt said, turning and propelling me toward a rickety little staircase. Akela growled at the woman, and Hunt put a reassuring hand on his head, hissing “be polite.”

“He really doesn’t like people,” I said, frowning at the wolf, who was so tolerant of me.

“He does not,” Hunt agreed, still guiding me forward. “He only likes his pack.”

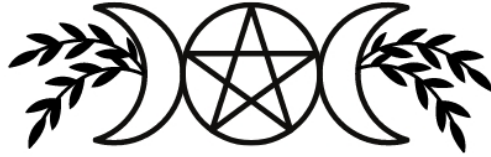
“And these people know you,” I said, climbing the stairs in front of Hunt as he nudged me from behind. “Is this where you’re from?”

“No,” he said. I waited for him to elaborate, but no elaboration came. I rolled my eyes.

“You owe me a truth,” I said, turning to glance back at him.

“You must think me a fool, Red,” he said, giving me another little nudge, “if you think I’ll be playing any more of your games.”

I sighed, frustrated that my trick had ruined the easy banter between us. It was going to be a long trek to find the Demon King.



Chapter 14

Hunt guided me to a small but cozily furnished room on the second floor of the little building. This must be an inn, or a bed and breakfast, because there were several rooms that shared our hallway.

There was a small fireplace that crackled merrily, a plush looking four poster bed, and another door at the back of the room that must lead to a bathing chamber.

“So, you’re a lord?” I asked, plopping down on the plush bed and practically groaning at its softness. Hunt may be angry with me, but I would fight him for this bed. I flopped back, enjoying the feeling of something other than forest floor or prickly straw beneath me.

“Again, I don’t owe you any more truth,” Hunt said angrily, all patience and kindness he had shown the local people gone. “I’m not the one who lied about practically everything since we met.” He perched against the fireplace, arms crossed angrily as he glared at me.

“I didn’t lie about everything,” I said defensively, propping myself up on my elbows. “I told you I had to run for my life.”

“You didn’t tell me why,” Hunt growled, biting the words off as if they had offended him.

“Can you really blame me?” I asked, my own anger rising as he projected his. “You were a complete stranger to me. You still are! How could I trust you?”

“Really?” he snapped. “I’m still a stranger?” I took a breath, trying to calm my pounding heart. Fighting with him would not help my case, and I didn’t want to spend however long it would take to reach the Demon King at odds. Hunt had helped me multiple times and had proven he would uphold his end of the bargain.

“I’m sorry,” I said, sitting up and scooting to the edge of the bed closest to him. “I truly am. I know it wasn’t fair of me. But I don’t even

know your real name, so yes, we are still strangers.”

With a growl, Hunt threw down his bow and dagger and stormed toward the door.

“Stay,” he said to Akela, who had started to follow him. The wolf made a noise that sounded almost like an irritable sigh, as if lamenting that his humans were fighting, but he curled up obediently on the floor by the door.

“Where are you going now?” I asked exasperatedly.

“Out,” Hunt shouted. “And don’t you dare leave this room.”

He slammed the door and I heard the lock click into place. Had the bastard locked me in? I scrambled over the bed to the door and shook the handle. He had. I cursed. If I had my chalk and a mirror, and a few other items, I could unlock the damn thing. I felt utterly powerless without my craft.

“Bastard,” I snarled, glaring at the door as if it and Hunt were in cahoots. Akela whined, and I reached down to scratch his head. “Sorry.”

I sighed, deciding to make the best of my hopefully temporary imprisonment. I investigated the little bathing chamber and found a tub, with pipes that must lead to a well or a tank, because water flowed out of them when I turned a handle. It was even warm, and I became unreasonably excited to have a bath. I momentarily hesitated, wondering if it might be demon magic that made the warm water come out from the wall. Ultimately, I decided that my need for a bath outweighed my scruples.

I grimaced, realizing I would have to put on the same dirty clothes when I was clean, but there wasn’t much to be done about that without any magical elements. I closed the door to the chamber, hoping Hunt didn’t return until I was dressed. I eagerly climbed into the tub, sighing as the warm water enveloped me.

I must have been more exhausted than I felt, because a knock at the door startled me out of the doze I had fallen into.

“Did you drown, Red?” came a voice through the door. Hunt had clearly returned, and he sounded almost back to normal, only a slight edge of irritation to his voice.

“I’m fine,” I called back, quickly dunking my head to wash my hair. There were some little bars of soap on the ledge of the tub, and I scrubbed quickly so I could get out of the now tepid bath.

“There are clean clothes out here,” Hunt said from behind the door. “I’ll be back in ten minutes.” I heard the door to the room closing again and took the opportunity to get out of the bath. There were towels on a little ledge attached to the wall, and I luxuriated in the soft, fluffiness after days of being cold and scratchy.

Emerging from the room, I found that my dirty clothes were nowhere to be found. Frowning, I examined the clean ones that had been stacked neatly on the bed. There was a blouse that looked like it would probably fit fine, and a kind of bodice that must go over the blouse. But instead of skirts, there were a pair of trousers made from soft leather, very much like Hunt’s. I frowned, having never donned trousers before.

Witches wore skirts, even for riding, as it was deemed feminine, bringing us closer to the Goddess. I wasn’t sure they would even fit. The legs seemed like they might be too snug around my thighs.

To my surprise, the trousers had some stretch. They were a little tight, clinging a bit too closely to all the places I felt sure were not appropriate for trousers to cling to, but they would do. At least they were soft and warm. The waistband was a bit too snug with the front laced, so I left it loose, draping the blouse over the front of them to hide the indecency.

Hunt returned as I was braiding my hair, resorting to using my fingers as a comb since I couldn’t find one in the room. He had a bowl of something that steamed gently, and a chunk of some kind of brown bread.

“I brought you food,” he said, pointedly not looking at me as he set the food down on the little table next to the bed.

“Thank you,” I said, trying to sound genuine, and maybe a little meek in the hopes it would mollify him. He raised a brow at me, finally looking my way, then strode into the bathing chamber without another word. He shut the door and I heard water running. Sighing, I ate my dinner alone in silence, the only sounds were splashing from the bathing room and the crackling of the fire in the hearth.

Having eaten, I crawled beneath the covers of the bed. I was determined that I would not be sleeping on the floor, and I was prepared to stake my claim to the warm softness that enveloped me.

Hunt emerged from the bathing room, hair damp from his bath and wearing absolutely nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. My mouth went a little dry at the sight of his bare upper body, thickly muscled and scarred in places where he had clearly taken bites or blades. I watched

him as he fished some clean clothes from a pile. He had clearly gone shopping while I was locked in the room.

"You're staring, Red," he said, grinning deviously at my heated face. "Do I have drool on my chin?" I scowled, throwing a pillow at him.

He chuckled as he caught it and placed it neatly back on the foot of the bed. "Better avert your delicate, virgin eyes if you don't want to be scandalized," he said, dropping the towel. I blushed even more furiously and looked away quickly, although not quickly enough to miss seeing the curve of a firm buttocks. I stared hard at the ceiling and prayed to the Goddess for strength and delivery from this insufferable man.

I heard the door locking and risked a glance, relieved to see that Hunt was fully dressed.

"I'm not sleeping on the floor," he said, leaning against the door. Akela huffed at him, and Hunt obliged by leaning down and scratching his head, clearly having forgiven the wolf for siding with me.

"Then you'll have to share," I said, raising a brow at him in challenge. My face still felt warm, and I pulled the covers up to hide me completely.

"Fine by me," he said, seeming totally unconcerned. He flopped heavily on to the bed, taking up far more space than was necessary. I let out a little cry of protest and he chuckled darkly.

"Why not rent an extra room if you're so fabulously wealthy?" I asked, trying to wrestle the blankets over to my side of the bed.

"Because," he growled, turning to face me properly for the first time in hours. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Fine," I said, trying to slow my racing heart and get myself under control. Something about his proximity in the bed and his lack of self-consciousness heated my blood, and I tamped the feeling down by drawing on anger. "But you sleep over the blankets."

"Fine," he agreed, folding his arms behind his head and closing his eyes as if totally immune to my annoyance. I expected him to make some jab about my delicate sensibilities or something, but he just lay there completely unbothered. It was infuriating.

"You locked me in," I accused. I was determined to pick a fight, it seemed, and Hunt was determined not to fight with me.

"I did," he said, sounding utterly unconcerned about it. "And I doubt even you can really blame me for it."

“You clearly don’t know me all that well,” I said, turning on my side to face away from him.

He huffed out an unamused laugh. “Believe me Red,” he said darkly. “I’m aware.”

“Can we please stay?” I begged as Hunt dragged me around the next day, buying supplies for our continued journey. Akela had gone off to hunt with Artemis in the Bloodwood, and the village, which Hunt finally told me was called Mithloria, was out in full force preparing for the May Day feast, and their excited enthusiasm was contagious.

“No,” Hunt said, for the hundredth time. “I’m fulfilling this deal as fast as possible, and that does not include attending parties.”

“But the people here love you,” I protested, gesturing around me at the smiling villagers. I was still working through the shock of finding a perfectly normal, and by all appearances thriving, mortal village in the Darklands. This was secondary to the shock of finding out that Hunt was someone of importance, and maybe actually fabulously wealthy.

We’d had no need for gold in the Bloodwood, but today he spent it liberally, pulling a pouch I hadn’t seen before from his shirt and making polite small talk with the villagers as he shopped. He knew each one by name, and he seemed to know all about them. He asked after their children and businesses, and deflected interested looks at me by explaining that he was escorting me to the palace. His tone brooked no further questions, and the people satisfied themselves with inspecting me and waving at me from a distance.

At first, I was worried it might be the trousers, but I saw other women wearing them too, and the self-consciousness of having the shape of my legs completely visible paled in comparison with the freedom of movement. The only downside was the lack of pockets.

“Are you their Lord?” I asked, biting down on an apple Hunt had tossed me when I complained of being hungry. I hadn’t eaten since the stew the night before, and Hunt seemed to be able to survive on air alone when

he was focused. "Their protector or something?" I added around a mouthful of apple.

"You have charming manners," Hunt said flatly, grimacing at me as I ate. "And it's something like that."

"Humph," I said over a mouthful of apple. I remembered that last time I'd had one, it withered in my hands. The shadowy thing inside me lurched happily, and I gagged, spitting out the apple I had been chewing on.

"Smaller bites, Red," Hunt said, his back to me as he inspected a collection of cloaks.

I looked down at the apple, frowning. I hadn't meant to pull on the demon magic, but something had clearly awoken it. The apple was black and withered in my hand.

"Ugh" I said, looking at the withered thing as I held it as far away from my nose as possible.

Hunt turned, brows raising at the sight. "You can eat a fresh apple, Red," he said, bemusedly. "I'm not *that* angry at you."

"It's the magic," I said, irritation rising at his obtuseness. "It was fine a moment ago. I withered it."

"Interesting," said Hunt, returning to his favorite catchphrase. He held out his hand, and I dropped the apple into it for him to inspect. "Can you do it again?" he asked, pulling out a fresh apple.

"I don't want to do it again," I protested, pushing the apple back at him. "Whatever this is needs to stay asleep."

"Does it feel like it's alive in you?" he asked warily, narrowing his eyes at me.

"Sort of," I said, not wanting to tell him about the bright and shadowy creatures I could feel parading around my stomach. He smirked. "Don't you dare say it's interesting again."

Hunt laughed. "I think you'll have to learn to control it," Hunt said thoughtfully, heading down the row of shops and perusing their wares slowly. "Rather like a demon would."

"I don't want to control it," I said, wrinkling my nose at the idea. "I want to get rid of it"

"Why?" Hunt asked, pausing to examine a rack of cloaks. "Seems like a useful ability, both healing and killing with a thought."

"I told you, it's not natural," I argued, putting my hands on my hips. "What if I accidentally wither Akela? Or You?"

“Let’s find out,” Hunt asked, holding out his hand to me. “If I die, then we’ll know you definitely shouldn’t touch him.”

“Be serious,” I snapped, feeling frustrated by my lack of understanding.

“I am, Red,” Hunt said, placing a hand on my cheek. I jerked back at the contact, staring at Hunt in horror, but he kept his hand in place, warm and firm against my skin. He stroked his thumb once over my cheekbone, making my stomach coil confusingly.

“See,” he said, smirking as he removed his hand. “I’m fine. As long as you don’t intend for us to die, we’ll be fine.”

“So you’re doomed then,” I said, sitting on a low wall and putting my head in my hands as Hunt barked out a laugh. “This is so wrong.”

“Cheer up, Red,” Hunt said, a smirk in his voice making me look up at him. He had a red cloak in his hand and a ridiculous grin on his face. “Look what I found.”

“I don’t actually like the color red, just so you know,” I said, scrambling after him as he purchased the cloak.

He tossed it to me, a brow raised. “I believe that ‘thank you’ is more customary,” Hunt said, “but maybe witches aren’t all that civilized.”

“Thank you,” I bit out.

“You’re welcome,” he said, as if we hadn’t been arguing at all. I was relieved that he had forgiven me enough for our easy banter to return, but Hunt had clearly made it his mission to annoy me for the rest of our journey together.

A random villager waved at me from across the square, and I smiled and waved back. Excited whispering broke out, and Hunt frowned.

“Don’t encourage them,” he growled, pulling me away from the square so he could hire horses.

“Encourage them how?” I asked, truly bewildered. “By being friendly?”

“You have no idea, do you?” Hunt asked, smirking down at me. “Oh, you’re going to hate this.”

“Hate what?” I asked, frowning up at him as he loomed over me.

Hunt’s smirk widened to a grin. “They think you’re my bride,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“What?” I exclaimed. “Why would you tell them that?”

“I didn’t,” Hunt said, turning back toward the farrier, who rented out some of the local horses to travelers. “They assumed, and I didn’t correct them.”

“Why wouldn’t you correct them?” I asked again, jogging after him as I looked around in horror at the smiling, friendly faces.

“Because it amuses me,” he said, smirking again as he ducked into the little shop attached to the stable where the farrier conducted business. “And I knew it would bother you.”

“Why would you be taking your bride to the Demon King?” I hissed, grinding my teeth as Hunt rang the bell for service.

“Probably for the King’s blessing,” Hunt said evenly. “Even mortals like to follow tradition sometimes, especially the important ones.”

“So you are important?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest and giving him a scathing look.

“I already told you I was, Red,” he said, not looking at me as he studied a display of horseshoes on the counter.

“Why would someone important be running around in the Bloodwood?” I hissed, trying to make sure the farrier wouldn’t hear our argument. Hunt turned, crowding me in the tiny space.

“Probably for the same reason a witch was running around in the Bloodwood,” he rumbled, his voice lowering to match mine and coming out far more silky and sensual than mine had. “I was hunting for something.”

The farrier coughed, and Hunt spun, greeting him with the same polite friendliness he had met everyone in Mithloria with. I leaned against the wall stewing in my own embarrassment, contemplating how this must look to the villagers. Sharing a room, shopping together, emerging from the Bloodwood. No wonder they assumed we were engaged.

“I am sorry, my Lord,” said the farrier in an apologetic voice. “But I’ve only the one just now, what with May Day and all. And he’ll need shoeing before he’s fit to travel.” My heart gave a little leap. Did this mean we wouldn’t be able to leave before the festival?

“That’s fine,” Hunt said, dropping gold on the counter with a clink. “Can he be ready by tonight?”

“The earliest is tomorrow, I’m afraid,” said the farrier sheepishly. “The festival, and all.” Hunt sighed.

“Fine, tomorrow then,” he said, turning and nudging me out of the shop.

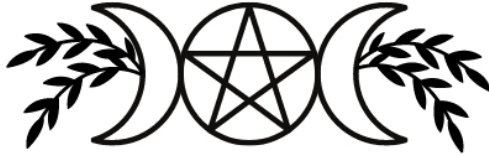
“Yes, my Lord. Thank you, my Lord!” the man called from behind us. Hunt’s glower was as dark as my smile was bright.

“So we can stay?” I asked excitedly, clapping my hands and jumping a little as I looked around Mithloria, the little village festooned with flowers and garlands. Hunt’s face darkened even more.

“I suppose we have no choice,” Hunt said, glaring at me. His glare morphed into something akin to an evil grin, and my own smile faltered.

“Why are you grinning?” I asked hesitantly, as he took my arm and guided me back toward the little inn.

“Because,” Hunt said, still grinning wickedly as he nodded politely to the villagers we passed. “Now you're actually going to have to pretend to be my bride.”



Chapter 15

After peppering Hunt with about a thousand questions, he finally admitted that I wouldn't really have to do anything special as his fake bride, but that I shouldn't tell the villagers it was a lie.

"First of all, because it will upset them," he said, when I had asked why I would need to be subjected to this charade. "And secondly, because *payback's a bitch*, Red."

"And why don't you have to get dressed up?" I protested, shouting to Hunt through the door of the bathing chamber.

"Because," Hunt replied, voice muffled slightly through the wooden door between us. "You can't improve perfection." I scoffed, making sure he heard my derision loud and clear. "And it's a village festival," he shouted. "It would be strange if I dressed more formally."

"Then why do I have to?" I shouted back.

"Because all the unmarried girls wear white," he shouted back. "Is that not a custom in the Witchlands?"

"For the mortal girls, maybe," I shouted back. "Witches wear black for the Beltane ceremony."

"Well you're not a witch here, remember?" he shouted. "That would definitely raise questions." I sighed, inspecting myself in the small mirror. Not a witch mirror, I noted, just a plain old looking glass.

The white silk dress Hunt had purchased for the occasion was a truly lovely thing, but I felt very exposed. The dress fell off my shoulders, delicate swoops of fabric hanging over my upper arms, and the bodice was snug. Mama's necklace was on full display, and I briefly wondered if I should remove it, but there was nowhere to hide it. Once again, my garment was plagued with a lack of pockets.

On my insistence, Hunt had purchased a cheap wooden comb, and I used it to try to work the worst of the knots out of my hair. Against the

white dress, the copper in my hair shone almost pink, soft irregular waves falling over my shoulders. The spattering of freckles across my nose seemed to stand out more than usual, and I rather thought my eyes did too. I felt far more energized than I had all through the Bloodwood, but I supposed a comfortable bed could do wonders.

I felt rather pretty, all things considered. Based on what he had said in the wood, I hoped Hunt would agree. I shook myself at the thought. I shouldn't care what Hunt thought. It would probably be something sarcastic anyway.

I took a steadying breath, preparing myself for whatever Hunt might say upon seeing me vaguely resembling a lady. With a grimace, I realized that I didn't have shoes that would be appropriate, and I sighed as I pulled on my dirty boots beneath the white silk. Very ladylike. I pulled the boots off, deciding just to go barefoot.

"Time's up, Red," Hunt called through the door. "The sun is setting. Get out here."

I sighed, pushing the door open. Hunt was perched on the end of the bed, playing tug-of-war with Akela, who, despite having returned with a bloodied muzzle as evidence of his hunting, seemed to act more like a giant dog than a wolf most of the time. He had something clamped tightly between its teeth, and Hunt was smiling as he pulled it back and forth and Akela growled after it.

Hunt wasn't dressed up, but he was in clean clothes, and he looked like any of the villagers in brown leather trousers and a clean white shirt. The shirt made his tan skin seem more golden than it had in the Bloodwood, and it was open at the neck and collar, revealing a slight dusting of dark hair. Curse my stupid eyes for noticing that.

I coughed, and both Hunt and Akela looked up from their game, the rag they were playing with falling to the floor.

"Well?" I asked, turning once on my bare toes to show off the dress. "Will I embarrass you, *my Lord*?" I tried to inject ire into the title, but Hunt's face stopped me in my tracks. He was looking at me strangely, and Akela looked at me interestedly, giving his tail an uncharacteristic wag.

"I'm glad *you* approve," I said to the wolf, scratching him behind the ears as he butted my knee. He left a wet patch on the silk skirts, but I didn't really care. It was nice to feel his approval.

“Well?” I asked again, looking at Hunt. He closed his mouth, pursing his lips.

“The necklace doesn’t match,” he said darkly. “You should take it off.” I laughed.

“So you can make off with it?” I asked. “I think not.”

“I can’t take it, Red,” Hunt said irritably, still looking at me a little strangely. He stood and walked around me, as if appraising the overall look. “But fine, keep it. Maybe the villagers will assume it’s a betrothal gift.”

I grimaced, now contemplating taking the thing off, and Hunt chuckled as if he knew exactly what I was thinking.

“Reverse psychology really does work on you,” he said, raising a dark brow. “As long as I approve of something, you hate it.”

“Not everything,” I argued. Hunt raised a brow, as if pointing out that I was in fact arguing. “I like Akela.”

“Hmm,” Hunt said, scratching the wolf under the chin. “Akela is not nearly discerning enough in his taste in friends.” Akela huffed at Hunt in protest..

“You might be right about that,” I said, giving Hunt a wry look. He glared at me, and I couldn’t help cracking a smile. I was glad we were back to easygoing, instead of outright hostility. “Should we go?”

The faint sounds of music from the square had started to waft toward us, and Hunt sighed as if dreading the evening.

“Let’s get it over with then,” he said, gesturing toward the door. “Lead the way, Red.”

I didn’t bother to hide my excitement as I skipped down the stairs and out into the square. The night wasn’t exactly warm, but it wasn’t too bad, even with my bare feet. Villagers from all around had already started to gather and dance in the square, where a painted maypole had been erected to one side, and children laughed as they danced merrily around it.

I tilted my head up to look at Hunt and gave him a childish grin.

He frowned down at me. “You’re going to have to pretend to be more dignified,” he said, plastering on what was obviously a fake smile, and hooking my arm through his. He guided me toward the tables, greeting villagers by name and making jokes. The fake smile quickly became a real one, and Hunt was affable with all of them, more than he had been with me on most of our trip together. I felt an odd pang of jealousy at seeing this jovial, likable Hunt.

“Drink?” Hunt asked, offering me a glass of something red and sparkling.

“What is it?” I asked, taking the glass and sniffing the sparkling liquid. It smelled sweet, and I took a tentative sip. Bubbles danced across my tongue, and the tart flavor of berries made me sigh with pleasure.

“Bloodberry wine,” Hunt said, taking a sip from his own glass and raising his brows at me above the glass. “The name is unpleasant, but the berries are sweet. They only grow here in the Darklands.”

“The Darklands seem the opposite of dark,” I said, taking another sip and looking around at the merriment.

“A smart strategy then,” Hunt agreed, clinking his glass against mine. “To keep unwanted visitors out.”

“Like me?” I asked, shooting him a grin.

“Your words, not mine,” he said, smiling back at me. Something eased in my chest as I sipped the wine, and I felt inexplicably light.

“Pardon, my Lord,” a young man asked nervously. He was a nice looking boy, a full foot shorter than Hunt, and only a little taller than I was. He smiled jovially. “Would the lady like to dance?”

“You’ll have to ask the lady,” Hunt replied, nodding down at me. I looked to see several young people filling the floor, many of the girls in white dresses as they danced merrily to the fiddle and drums. I downed my wine and smiled at the boy.

“I’d love to,” I said, letting him take my hand and lead me to the floor. Hunt watched with an amicable expression, seemingly unbothered as I was passed around from partner to partner as we spun around the maypole. Back home, Beltane was a time for praying to the Goddess, thanking her for her blessings, and performing fertility rituals to guard the next generation of witchlings. But in the human villages, it was more about frivolity and celebrating the beginning of warmer weather. I kind of preferred the mortal version, honestly.

The night became a bit of a blur as I danced along with the crowd. Hunt was a statue at the edge of the square as he watched. He was perfectly polite to anyone who spoke to him, but he refused to dance or take part in any particular merriment, other than having a second glass of wine. I was already on my third when I sat down heavily next to him for a break. My feet were aching without shoes, but I was having too much fun to care.

“How many of those have you had?” Hunt asked darkly, frowning and lifting the glass from my hand.

“Only two,” I replied, a little more fuzzily than I might have otherwise.

“And a half,” Hunt said, still frowning. “Bloodberry is extremely potent, Red.”

“I’m fine,” I said, rolling my eyes so hard I almost tipped over. Hunt caught me before I fell.

“You’re drunk,” he said, being far too serious for such an occasion. As much as I loved and honored the Goddess, mortals might be right about this kind of celebration. Beltane was never this much fun. “You should stop, Red. Bloodberry can have unpleasant side effects on mortals if they drink too much. I’m guessing they are the same for witches.”

“Like what?” I asked, lifting the glass from his hand and downing the rest of it. He rolled his eyes.

“Like giving you a hell of a hangover, for a start,” he said. I smiled. Everything seemed so pleasant, it was hard not to smile. And he was pleasant. And his face was pleasant.

“You have nice eyes,” I said dreamily. I sat in shock for all of one second before clamping my hand over my mouth, eyes wide in horror. Hunt burst out laughing.

“Uninhibited truth-telling is also a side effect,” he said. “And thank you for the compliment.”

“Oh, Goddess,” I groaned, making him laugh again.

“What else do you like about me,” Hunt asked, crossing his arms and looking at me expectantly.

I pursed my lips hard, but to no avail. The truth spilled out of me anyway.

“Your shoulders,” I said, clapping the hand back over my mouth. Hunt grinned.

“And?” he pressed, downing his own glass of wine.

“Your backside,” I said behind my muffling hands, my face flushing as crimson as the Bloodberry wine as Hunt laughed again.

“Just kill me now,” I groaned, dropping my face into my hands.

“Come on, Red,” he said, taking my hands as he stood and pulling me to my feet. “I’d better save you from yourself.”

He put a strong hand on my waist and clasped my other hand.

“What are you doing?” I asked, still red with embarrassment.

“Dancing it off is the best cure,” he replied, leading me onto the floor and moving with feline grace I hadn’t expected. “And you’ll almost certainly embarrass both of us if you dance with anyone else right now.”

“You’re a nice man,” I said, biting my lip as the wine continued to wring the truth from me. “I think if you weren’t such an ass half of the time, I might fall for you.”

“Ouch,” Hunt said, smirking down at me. “The truth hurts, Red.”

“Please let me go crawl into a hole and die now,” I said as he continued to spin me around. “I can’t even say I’m sorry because I can’t lie.”

Hunt laughed again and the sound rumbled through me. I suddenly realized how closely we were pressed together, and heat flooded through me for an entirely different reason.

“It’s refreshing, having you forced to speak the truth,” Hunt said, spinning me around. The sun had almost fully set, and the sky had turned a golden red. “Maybe I should pack some wine with us.”

“I am sorry for tricking you,” I said, knowing now at least he wouldn’t be able to doubt my honesty. “It was before I had gotten to know you.”

“I know,” Hunt said gently. “I forgive you.”

“You do?” I asked, looking up at him in surprise.

He smirked again. “I think this is payment enough for your crimes, don’t you?” he teased. I groaned again, trying to pull my hand from his grip to cover my face. He held it tighter, pulling me a little closer.

“A truth for a truth, Red,” he said. “You have nice eyes too.”

“Thank you,” I said, blushing furiously.

The village had sort of faded to the background as we had been dancing, but it came back to the foreground now as villagers surrounded us, throwing flowers at us. Hunt released me, and I laughed.

“What’s all this?” I asked, as villagers began to surround us, clapping and cheering. One of the women placed a crown of woven flowers atop my head, and I laughed, reaching up to stop it from toppling off.

“They’ve crowned you the Queen of May,” Hunt said, leaning against the fountain and crossing his arms. “You have to open the feast.”

“How do I do that?” I asked, shouting over the sounds of the villagers.

“You have to crown a king!” a small voice shouted, lifting a second flower crown that was a twin to mine. Many other voices joined the small

voice, shouting at me to crown a king.

“Choose me, my lady,” came a chorus of male voices as men crowded around the square, jostling for my attention. I laughed, feeling ridiculous and overwhelmed. Hunt sat on the fountain, looking impassively at the crowd.

“Alright, fine,” I said, taking the crown and holding it out. “You want a king?” The crowd cheered, and several of the men grinned. I held the crown up high and dropped it on Hunt’s head.

The crowd roared in approval, and Hunt looked toward the sky as if praying for patience.

“You have no idea what you’ve just done, have you, Red?” he asked as the crowd pushed us together. The crown nearly fell off his head, and I reached up to put it back into place.

“Oh, have some fun, Hunt,” I shouted, grinning at him ridiculously. Clearly the wine had gone to my head, and I was having a lovely time, but Hunt gave me a hard look.

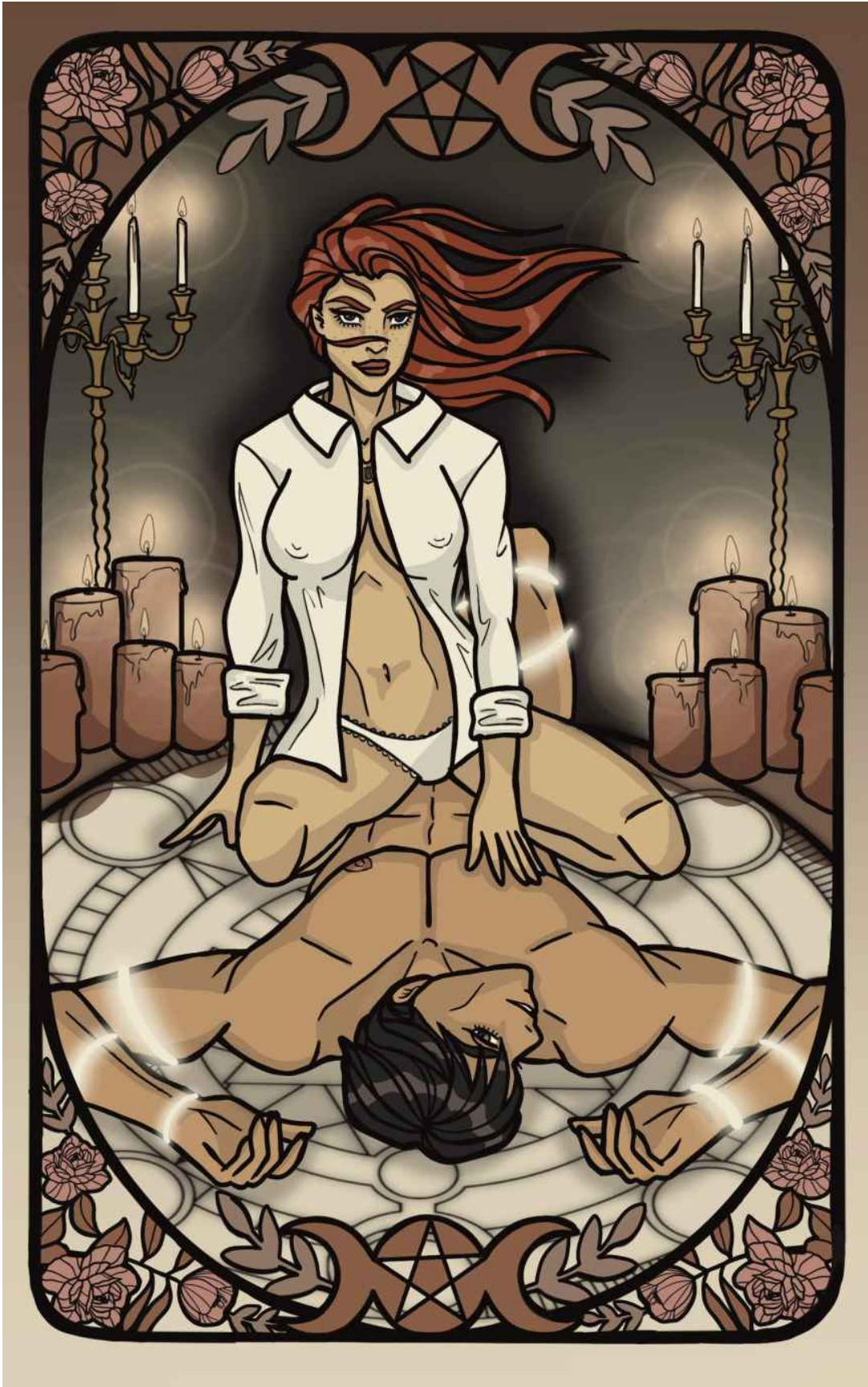
“Just remember that I tried to warn you,” he growled as the crowd pressed closer.

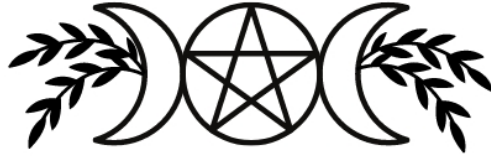
“Warn me about what?” I asked, gasping as I felt myself being pushed to stand atop a stool that had been put on the ground before me. Hunt was pushed up onto one too, and we stood there, above the crowd as they cheered. “Why are you so annoyed?”

“Because of this,” Hunt said, gripping me firmly around the waist as he bent and pressed his lips to mine, the crowd cheering loudly around us.

The Fool

Part 2





Chapter 16

Time seemed to both slow and speed up, the crowd around us fading away again as Hunt kissed me. His lips were soft and hard at the same time and warm as they pressed gently to mine. This was not a kiss like Vera had described to me. Hers were all tongues and teeth and desperation. This was gentle, almost sweet, and when Hunt broke away after what was both an interminably long and cruelly short time, I gasped a little.

Without another word, Hunt helped me down from the stool, grinning amiably as if pleased by what had just happened between us. I felt my cheeks flush, both from the heat the kiss had stirred in me and from the embarrassment of having basically forced Hunt to kiss me.

“Red,” Hunt said, drawing my attention as the crowd dispersed around us to continue the celebration. “You okay?”

“Yes,” I breathed, looking up at him and biting my lip. “I’m perfect. I mean fine. I’m fine.”

Hunt smirked, his hands still at my waist.

“I guess your truth isn’t good anymore,” he said, looking down at me, his own face looking a little flushed. “Sorry for ruining it.”

“I’m not,” I blurted, before clapping my hand over my mouth again. The damn wine was still affecting me. Rather than looking mortified at my confession, Hunt laughed.

“Come on, Red,” he said, putting an arm around my shoulders to lead me away from the festivities. The sun had fully set now, and the sky was all purples and blues in the dying light. “I think you may have had enough celebrating for one day.”

“I think you might be right,” I said, brushing my fingers over my lips, still feeling the ghost of the kiss.

“In the name of the Horned God, Red, are you well?” Hunt asked, stopping me with his arm and placing a hand on my forehead. “You’re

agreeing with me.”

I pushed his hand away irritably. “I...” I said, breaking off for fear of letting slip another unintentional truth.

“You what, Red?” Hunt asked, taking a step closer to me. I stepped back, cursing my misfortune that we had arrived at the inn and he had managed to back me against a wall.

The smirk fell from his face, replaced by a contemplative frown. Unlike when we had first met and he had backed me against a tree, Hunt didn’t retreat when he sensed my discomfort. Instead he stepped closer, snaking his hand around my waist again.

“What are you doing?” I whispered, putting my hands on his wrists to stop their movement.

“Waiting for you to answer,” he said, looking down at me seriously.

“I don’t want to answer,” I said, still holding his wrists and praying to the Goddess silently. I couldn’t decide if I was praying for this to stop or to continue, and that worried me.

“Why?” Hunt pushed, head tilting down toward mine as he waited for me to speak.

“Because it will be the truth,” I said honestly. “And the truth scares me.”

“Hmm,” he murmured, his eyes boring into mine. They looked dark green in this light, like a summer forest, and the glint in them might have promised mischief if he hadn’t looked so serious. “A truth for a truth then,” Hunt rumbled, bending low enough that his lips just barely brushed mine. I sucked in a breath, trying to stay perfectly still. “I wasn’t annoyed that you picked me because I didn’t want to kiss you.”

“You weren’t?” I breathed. I felt his lips turned up in a slight smile, still unbearably close to mine.

“I was annoyed,” he said, “because I didn’t want the first time I kissed you to be in front of an audience.”

He backed away then, removing his hands from my waist and taking a step back. I felt suddenly that there was far too much space between us.

“Your turn,” he said. He was giving me permission to walk away, I realized, and whether it was the damn wine or the festivities or my own inexperience, I let the reckless part of me take control as I lifted on my toes and kissed him.

His hand went around my back as he lifted me to him, and this kiss wasn't the same sweet, gentle brushing of lips in front of the May Day crowd. This kiss grew, becoming an exploration of lips and tongues and bodies as he pressed me back to the wall, one hand behind my head to cushion it, and the other roaming over my bodice and around my waist, pulling me close.

I moaned a little, and Hunt chuckled against my lips, ending the kiss far too soon.

"Why did you stop?" I asked, a little breathless and a lot unsatisfied. Warmth had pooled low in my belly, and desires that I hadn't felt before were making themselves known.

"Because you're drunk," Hunt said, pressing his forehead against mine to stop me from chasing his lips. "And we're still strangers, Red. You don't even know my name."

"Then tell me and we won't be strangers anymore," I said breathlessly, earning another rough laugh. Hunt brushed a whisper soft kiss across my lips that did nothing to calm the urgent beating that had taken up residence in my chest.

"If you still want to know in the morning," he said, "I'll tell you then."

"That's hours away," I whined.

He groaned feelingly. "Believe me, I know," he said. "And I have a torturous night of keeping my hands to myself before me. You're not making it easy."

"You don't have to keep your hands to yourself," I breathed, lifting my own to his chest to feel the hard planes of muscle there. Mortal boys were *not* built like this in the Witchlands.

"You're a virgin, Red," Hunt said, leaning back to look at me. "Unless you were lying about that?" I shook my head, biting my lip. This felt like a very sharp turn from the direction we had been heading in this morning, and my stomach swooped excitedly at the thought.

"I don't want your first time to be with someone you don't really know," Hunt said, lifting a hand to cup my flushed cheek. "Someone you don't really trust."

"I trust you," I said, a little more defensively than I had intended. He chuckled, stroking his thumb over my cheekbone. I felt it burn as a thought struck me.

“Oh Goddess, unless you don’t want to,” I said, horror making my blood cool.

“I promise you, that’s not it, Red,” he said, looking at me with an amused tilt of his brow.

“Gods, you don’t have to lie to me,” I groaned, putting my face in my hands again.

“Elara,” he said, taking my hands in his and pressing himself against me. I started, first at his use of my real name, and then at the hard evidence that he definitely did want to.

“Oh,” I said in a small voice.

“Oh,” he echoed, the ghost of a smirk still on his face. “You’ve had a lot to drink, and this is a lot to process for someone with very little experience.” I spluttered a protest, but he lifted his fingers to my lips to stop me.

“If,” he said, emphasizing the word with a press of his hips against mine, which did a lot more to silence me than his fingers on my lips. “*If* you are still interested, and *if* we find ourselves someplace that I can do the job properly, then make no mistake, Elara, I will gladly take you to bed.”

“Okay,” I breathed, unsure what else to say to that. My insides had gone a bit molten, and I was fairly sure it was only Hunt pressed against me that was keeping me upright. Vera had told me enough that I knew what the hard press of him meant, and another thrill went through me to think that he wanted me.

“Okay,” he said, stepping back so that I had to clutch onto the wall for support.

He was about to say something else when a thundering boom drew our attention away from each other and toward the Bloodwood. Hunt cursed as a ball of fire lit the sky above the woods. It looked like it was several miles in, and I clutched his shoulder in panic.

“The Hag,” I started.

“She’ll be fine,” Hunt said, striding away from me, his commanding presence taking control of the crowd. “Everyone back in your homes.”

The villagers scattered, screams of terror from children and panic from the elderly warping the festival into a macabre imitation of itself. Hunt strode toward the woods, and I finally came to my senses enough to go after him.

“What are you doing?” I asked, as more fire lit the sky. It was like an eerie sunrise, coming from the wrong direction.

“Is there anything else you want to tell me, Red?” Hunt asked, turning on me, his face livid as he grasped me firmly by the shoulders. I stammered, looking toward the sky above the fire, where words had appeared in scrawling script, written in the smoke and outlined against the flames that lit the night sky.

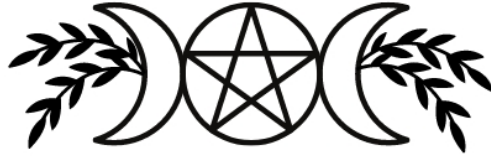
Bring Her Back

“Well?” he demanded, giving me a little shake. “Elara.”

“It’s my grandmother,” I said weakly, eyes wide at the magic she must have used to send this message, and the cost it must have required. Miles of forest burned, and the lives of the animals and monsters would be the toll the Goddess demanded.

“And who the fuck is your grandmother?” Hunt pushed, giving me another little shake to pull my attention back to him. “Elara, I swear on all the gods, you need to tell me the fucking truth right now.”

“She’s the Crone,” I shouted, interrupting his tirade. “My grandmother is the Crone of the Witchlands Coven.”



Chapter 17

Hunt had wasted no time in taking me and, I presumed, the necklace as far away from Mithloria as he could. Within minutes, he had sent for our things to be brought from the inn, calmed the villagers who were asking all manner of questions, and promised he'd look into the disturbance.

He dragged me along to the farrier, waking the poor old man and insisting that we had to leave at once.

"Get changed," he growled, throwing me my boots and clothes and the red cloak he had bought that morning. "We leave in five minutes."

He stomped out to the stable with the dazed old man, and I tore off the dress, holding back tears as I pulled on my traveling clothes. I would not let myself fall apart over this. Over a perfect moment ruined by an awful truth.

"Get it together, Elara," I growled at myself, lacing the boots and throwing the cloak over my shoulders. It was far finer than the one Vera had given me, with delicate embroidery running all along the edges and seams, but I'd have to admire it when I wasn't running for my life.

"Come on, Red," Hunt shouted from the stable, and I stumbled out of the shop to find a single horse, fully saddled and packed, supplies tied neatly to its saddle as it stomped impatiently.

"Only one horse?" I asked in alarm, looking wide eyed at Hunt. It had only faintly registered that Hunt had procured one horse, and the festival had wiped the whole affair from my mind. I realized how awkward my life was about to become. There would be no way to avoid being pressed against Hunt if we shared a saddle.

"Unless you'd prefer to run alongside me, then yes," Hunt bit out, gesturing for me to place a foot in the stirrup. I stiffened, worrying my lower lip between my teeth.

Hunt seemed to sense my worry. "A horse is different than an apple," he said, confirming that he knew my fears. "Intention matters. You've

never hurt Akela or me. I think you have enough control over whatever this is to not kill the horse.”

I nodded, taking a breath as I placed my foot in the stirrup and swung myself up over the saddle. I didn’t even get to enjoy the fact that it was so much easier in trousers, pockets be damned.

Hunt swung up behind me, and the horse whinnied irritably, as if protesting our combined weight.

“Where is Akela?” I asked, looking around and failing to find the huge wolf.

“I sent him ahead to scout the road,” Hunt replied, as if speaking of a soldier rather than an animal. “He’ll meet us.”

With a kick from Hunt, and without a word of farewell to the farrier, we were off. Hunt set a brutal pace, pushing the horse fast as we sped away from Mithloria toward the mountain range on the horizon. Holding myself away from him was nearly impossible at this speed, and within minutes, my abdomen and arms were on fire.

“Sit back, Red,” Hunt grunted behind me. “I won’t bite.”

“So you say,” I said, gingerly relaxing while still trying to keep distance between us. Hunt let out an irritated noise and hooked me around the waist, pulling me to him with the band of one strong arm.

“I was trying to be courteous,” I grumbled, giving in and leaning back into him.

“You should have done that when you decided to lie about being the Crone’s granddaughter and heir,” Hunt growled.

“I didn’t lie,” I snapped. “You never asked.”

“Why on earth would I have asked you if the Crone was your grandmother?” Hunt snapped. His breath was warm in my ear, but all the heat from earlier was gone, replaced by icy fury.

“I didn’t think you would help me if you knew,” I snapped back. “And don’t you dare lie and say you would.”

“For that stone around your neck, I might have,” Hunt argued. “If you had told me, I could have been more fucking prepared. And I wouldn’t have put an innocent village at risk by taking you there.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, choking back the tears I had been fighting. “I really am. About Mithloria. Will the people be okay?”

“The king will protect them,” Hunt said gruffly, as if he sensed my emotion and had decided to back off from yelling at me. “I’ll send a

message to the palace as soon as we reach another village.”

“Do you know the king?” I asked. Of course, I thought, if Hunt was some kind of lord, it would make sense that he knew the king. That’s probably who granted him his title.

“Yes,” Hunt said tersely. I waited, but he didn’t offer anything else, so I sank into uncomfortable silence, praying to the Goddess that the people of Mithloria be spared my grandmother’s wrath.

I didn’t think she would risk destroying the Bloodwood. It would be too great a danger for the Witchlands. But there was a chance she would brave sending the Coven after me, and that would end badly for everyone. As strong as he might be, there was no way Hunt could fight off a dozen trained witches, and while I had no desire to return to be publicly executed, I didn’t want anyone else to die because of me.

“You could send me back,” I said quietly, barely audible over the pounding of the horse’s hooves. Hunt stiffened behind me, so I continued. “She would leave these people alone, if you sent me back.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Red,” Hunt growled angrily, tightening the arm around my waist almost painfully. I didn’t want to irritate him further by objecting, so I let him hold me too tightly, allowing the discomfort to serve as some kind of penance for my lies.

We rode through the night, and I spent the silence contemplating how wrong I had been about the Demon Kingdom. For its fearsome reputation, the Darklands was very much like the Witchlands. Tiny houses and farms dotted the country between villages, and the roads well kept in some places while rough in others. I still hadn’t seen a demon, or at least not anything recognizable as a demon, and I was beginning to realize that we truly had been lied to. Mama and Hunt were right.

I had questions, but I didn’t dare voice them while Hunt was in a temper. I dozed off a bit here and there, but I quickly discovered it was very difficult to sleep on a horse. Even the warm, foresty smell of Hunt behind me wasn’t enough to lull me to sleep for long, and by the time we arrived at another village in the gray pre-dawn light, I was falling asleep on my feet.

Akela was waiting for us, and he whined in greeting as we arrived, padding over to us and nudging me with his wet nose.

“From now on we ride through the night,” Hunt said, swinging down from the horse behind me. “You will stay hidden during the day,” he added

emphatically, gripping my waist to help me down. I was stiff and sore and exhausted and admittedly a bit hungover, and I stumbled as I dismounted.

“Steady, Red,” Hunt rumbled, holding me up. I looked up at him, exhaustion making it difficult to keep the turmoil I had been dwelling in for hours at bay. I felt a sob clog my throat, and I fought to swallow it back down.

“I’m sorry,” I croaked out. “I should have never come here.”

Hunt sighed, holding me at arms length and studying me thoughtfully. “Agree to disagree on that one, Red,” he said gently, folding me into his arms. The gesture was so warm and so unexpected that the dam of emotion broke out of me. I let myself breathe a single ragged sob into his chest, before taking a deep breath and forcing the feeling back down.

“You need sleep,” Hunt said, letting go of me to untack the horse and unpack our supplies. “Things are always worse when you’re tired.” I let out a strained laugh that was half a sob, and he handed me one of the supply bags with a wry smile. “Let’s go.”

With a hand on the small of my back, Hunt guided me into the tiny inn boasted by this village. The owner of the inn greeted Hunt as if he also knew him and insisted on carrying our things as he led us to a room.

“Do you know everyone?” I whispered, as I walked behind Hunt.

He chuckled. “Just about,” he said.

The room was small and comfortable, very similar to the one we had shared in Mithloria. I knew this visit would be purely functional, and the experience seemed somehow more depressing because of it.

“What about Akela?” I asked, realizing he hadn’t come up the stairs with us.

“He’s too big for this room,” Hunt answered, locking the door behind us. “He’ll stay with the horse in the stables.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling awkward about how to proceed now that we were off the road. “How far is the Demon King?” I asked, removing my boots and trying not to get dirt all over the clean floors. “Where does he live anyway?”

“In the capital city,” Hunt replied, dropping our supply bags on a small table by the window. He pulled the drapes closed tightly, making sure no one could see us. “Oneiros. Probably a three day ride from here.”

“I never knew traveling could take so long,” I said, pulling my legs up on the bed and crossing them.

“Do witches not travel?” Hunt asked, crossing his arms as he leaned on the edge of the table.

“We travel by mirror,” I replied, feeling strange having to explain the magic to someone. “Witch mirrors are cast with specific witch signs. An incantation lets you travel between any two witch mirrors, as long as you can clearly picture your destination.”

“Interesting,” Hunt replied, grinning in anticipation of my annoyance. I pursed my lips. “I will agree with you, that is a useful magic that isn’t found here. Speaking of which,” he added, turning to the supply bags and rummaging through them. “No one sells supplies specifically for witchcraft here, obviously,” he said, still digging through the bags for something. I craned my neck, trying to see what he was doing. “But I thought these might come in useful for you.”

Hunt produced a small leather pouch, placing it gingerly in front of me.

“It’s not much,” he said, “but it’s probably best if you have some magic you can control at your disposal.”

I opened the pouch to find a stick of plain white chalk, a pink crystal of middling quality, and a small hand-mirror.

“Thank you,” I said, my throat feeling rather dry. “How did you know what to get?”

“The Hag,” he replied simply as I packed the items away in their useful pouch. Rather than stow it away, I tied the pouch to the laces at the side of my bodice. It would be lumpy, and a bit cumbersome, but I would feel safer having my materials on hand.

“I want you to keep that hidden from now on,” Hunt added, moving to sit next to me and reaching out to touch Mama’s necklace. “Less scrupulous beings will kill for a shadow stone like that.”

“We wouldn’t want that,” I said with a sigh, stuffing the necklace down my shirt.

“No, we wouldn’t,” Hunt said. I looked up to see him studying me intently and felt myself flush, a little of the heat from Beltane creeping back in between us. We hadn’t addressed what happened between us or what was said, and I wasn’t sure based on what happened after if there was any point in dwelling on it.

“Carnon,” he said suddenly, catching me by surprise.

“What?” I asked, not understanding the foreign word. He smiled faintly.

“It’s my name,” he said. “My true name. Carnon.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised by his admission. “It doesn’t really suit you.” He barked a laugh and I blushed, realizing how rude that had sounded. “I just mean—I got used to calling you Hunt,” I said in a bit of a rush. “You don’t owe me any truths. Carnon.”

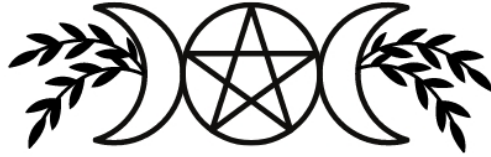
He smiled a little wider at my use of his name. “That one’s on the house,” he said, flopping back against the pillows and draping an arm over his face. “Just in case.”

“In case of what?” I asked, still sitting up on the edge of the bed.

He didn’t answer, letting out a soft snore. I scowled. He was either more tired than he had let on, or he was pretending to sleep to get out of answering more of my questions. I threw a pillow at him and he caught it deftly, hugging it to his chest and rolling onto his side. Pretending, then.

“Go to sleep, Red,” he said in a voice muffled by the pillow. “You can ask me a thousand more questions tonight.”

Frowning, but somewhat mollified by the promise of more answers, I lay down next to him, turning to face the opposite direction and letting my exhaustion sweep me away.



Chapter 18

“So what is Oneiros like?” I asked.

I had slept like the dead for almost twelve hours, finally waking when my stomach rumbled loudly enough that I could no longer ignore it.

Hunt, or Carnon, I supposed, had been awake when I first rose, hair damp from a bath and brows raised in annoyance. He had told me to eat, bathe, and be ready to go in twenty minutes, and now we were back on the road with night falling. Akela had run ahead to scout the road, and as hard as I tried to make out the landscape, it was impossible to see much beyond the shapes of hills in the darkness. The horse must know the way, because I could hardly see the road or the looming mountain range in front of us.

Once again, Carnon had wrapped an arm around my waist to force me to lean into him, and I was desperate to make some kind of conversation to avoid the awkwardness of the last day or so.

“It’s big,” he replied, eliciting an eye roll from me.

“Can you describe it please?” I asked, trying and failing not to let my impatience bleed through the request. Hunt—Carnon, Goddess it was going to be hard to use his proper name—grunted behind me.

“I’m not sure how to describe a city to you, Red,” he said. “There are buildings and roads and a lot of people.”

“But is it nice? Or dirty? Are the people like those in Mithloria?” I pressed.

“Like anywhere with a lot of people, there is variety,” Carnon said, giving me infuriatingly little to imagine. “You’ll just have to see it for yourself.”

“And do you live there?” I asked. “Or closer to Mithloria? Near the people who know you?”

“I’m regretting telling you that you could ask me a thousand questions,” Carnon growled behind me.

I smiled, pleased to have provoked him a bit. “But you did, and I have more,” I said enthusiastically.

“I told you before,” Carnon said. “I’m from all over.” I rolled my eyes and prayed to the Goddess for patience.

“How did you become a lord?” I asked, trying not to sound as irritated by his evasiveness as I felt. Despite my blunder with the leshy and the lying and probably a thousand other things, I wasn’t a complete idiot. Carnon was purposefully not telling me who he was, and it irritated me. Now that he knew most of my secrets, I wanted to have his.

Also, I was...curious. I was interested in him, and based on his reaction on Beltane, he was interested in me too, at least physically. If there was to be any hope of pursuing the intriguing activities he had suggested before my grandmother’s message ruined everything, we would have to get to know each other as more than circumstantial travel companions with too many secrets between us.

“If we’re doing this,” Carnon said, the arm around my waist squeezing a little tighter, “then I demand some answers as well.”

“Game of truths, then?” I asked, trying to twist in the saddle to see his face. He squeezed his arm tight around my waist, and I stopped wriggling.

“Not much of a game, but if you insist, yes,” Carnon said. “I became a lord because I was born a lord. My turn.”

“That was a boring answer,” I whined, hoping for something a bit more exciting than hereditary succession.

“You asked the question,” Hunt—Carnon, damn it all—replied with a chuckle. “Why are you running from your grandmother?”

“I told you that,” I said, frowning. “Mama thinks she will kill me because of the demon magic.”

“Do you think she knows?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, biting my lower lip. “Clearly she knows I’m missing, and where I’ve gone, but it’s possible Mama was able to lie to her. Goddess, I hope she’s alive.”

Carnon squeezed again, this time in comfort. “Your turn,” he rumbled. I knew he was trying to distract me from worrying about Mama, and I appreciated it.

“How long have you known the Demon King?” I asked.

“All my life,” Carnon replied.

“Really?” I asked. “Are you friends?”

“Something like that,” Hunt said, a frown in his voice. “It’s more like I work for him.”

“As a hunter?” I asked.

“As whatever he happens to be needing,” he replied wryly.

“Is he truly as bad as the witches say?” I asked.

“You’ll have to tell me what the witches say,” he replied darkly. I thought through all the stories that Vera had told me she had heard from her mother.

“My friend Vera told me that he has horns,” I began. “And that he boils his enemies alive. That he’s cruel and wicked to the mortals, and that after the Bloodwood separated the witches from the demons, he tortured and enslaved the mortals who hadn’t escaped.”

“Your friend Vera sounds like a gossip,” Carnon murmured.

“Is she right?” I asked, curious to learn more about this man Mama had insisted I put my faith in.

“Do the mortals look enslaved or tortured to you?” he asked, a little scathingly. “How would your friend know anyway, since the Bloodwood separated our lands?”

I realized I had touched a nerve. “I’m sorry,” I said slowly. Hunt breathed out a deep sigh.

“Like any ruler, he does what he has to do,” Carnon said eventually. “Is your grandmother always benevolent and kind?”

I scoffed. “If she were, I wouldn’t be here,” I replied.

“Exactly,” Carnon replied. “The horns though. That part is true.” I wanted to ask more, but he beat me to the next question.

“What do you know about your father?”

“I told you that already,” I said, frowning. “Were you even listening when we first met?”

“I was distracted,” Carnon said, squeezing the arm around me a little tighter and making me gasp. He chuckled. “Tell me again.”

“Really nothing,” I said when I could draw in a proper breath. “Just that he loved Mama, or at least, she says he did. And he gave her this necklace.” I put my hand to the stone beneath my shirt, which hummed a little. I wondered if this was a common property of shadow stone, but I didn’t want to waste a question on that.

“Do you look like him?” Carnon asked. I frowned.

“Why?” I asked.

“No follow ups,” Carnon said. I could feel him grinning behind me. “Just answer.”

“No,” I said. “I look like Mama. I don’t think there’s anything about me that resembles him. I’m all her.”

“Interesting,” Carnon said. I elbowed him gently in the ribs and he laughed. “You get one more today, Red,” he said, his face close to mine as he leaned forward. “Make it a good one.”

“You said a thousand,” I argued.

Carnon laughed. “I’m tired, Red,” he said. “Ask your question.”

I felt heat creep up my cheeks as I considered what I might ask. Biting my lip, I said a quick prayer for courage.

“Why are you interested in what you said you were interested in on Beltane?” I asked, realizing the question had come out rather confusing and jumbled in my attempt to beat around the bush.

“Come again?” Carnon asked, still grinning behind me.

“I mean,” I tried again, taking a deep breath. “Why did you kiss me? On May Day?”

“I believe you orchestrated that by being woefully ignorant of our culture and crowning me the May King,” he replied dryly.

“Not that kiss,” I said, feeling heat creep up my neck. “The other kiss.”

“Ah,” Carnon said. “That kiss.” He was quiet for a moment, and I thought he maybe wouldn’t answer, when he said, “Because I wanted to.”

“That’s it?” I asked, disappointment filling my chest. “You just go around kissing girls whenever you feel like it?”

“Come on, Red,” Carnon said, sounding annoyed now. “Of course not.”

“Then why?” I asked, trying again to turn, and again finding myself trapped by his damn arm.

“Because,” he growled, leaning close to my ear again, “I had been thinking about it since the first time I saw you in the Bloodwood arguing with Artemis like a crazed lunatic.”

“You have such a way with words,” I breathed, trying to sound scathing despite the increased beating of my heart.

Carnon chuckled darkly. “I’m usually significantly more coherent,” he said, still holding me tightly to him. “Something about you makes me lose all capacity for rational thought.”

“Because I make you so angry?” I pressed, leaning into him a little.

“Because you make me want things I shouldn’t be wanting, Red,” he growled, sending a shiver up my spine.

“Oh,” I said, not sure what else to say to this proclamation. My heart was beating a tattoo against my ribs, and I wished very much that we were not on a horse right now.

“Oh,” he agreed.

We were silent for a long time after this pronouncement, both of us clearly wrapped up in thoughts. I very much hoped that Carnon’s thoughts were as impure as mine, but he was all business when he next spoke.

“We should arrive in the city tomorrow night,” he said. “I have some friends we can stay with while we figure out the best way to approach the Demon King with your little problem.”

“You have friends?” I asked in mock surprise. Carnon pinched my hip gently, and I swatted his hand.

“You will be polite to my friends, Red, or so help me,” he said, leaving the threat unfinished.

“I’m always polite,” I replied, earning a snort.

A sudden screech told me that Artemis had found us, which meant Akela was probably somewhere nearby too. Artemis landed on the horse’s head with a feathery hoot, flapping her bat-like wings once to find her balance. The horse whinnied in protest, clearly not pleased that a large creature had taken up residence between its ears.

“No mice tonight?” I asked, feigning disappointment. Artemis gave me a scathing look, and I laughed at how disgruntled she could make herself seem.

“It’s odd, how much they like you,” Carnon said, reaching around me to scratch under Artemis’ beak.

“Maybe animals just sense that I’m a kindred spirit,” I said, offering Artemis a scratch under her wing. She rejected me soundly, flapping past me to land on Carnon’s shoulder. “Clearly she’s not that fond of me right now.”

“That’s because she’s a little show off,” Carnon replied, obliging the strix with the wing scratch she had rejected from me. “She doesn’t like sharing my attention with another woman.” I snorted, and Akela whined below us as if reminding us that he, too, was present and wanted attention.

“Needy beasts,” Carnon mumbled.

“How did Artemis come to you?” I asked, trying and failing once again to turn in Carnon’s arms. “You told me that Akela was part of your rite. What about her?”

“Artemis has always been with me,” Carnon said, thoughtfully. “From the earliest of my memories, she favored me with her protection.”

“Is that normal?” I asked. “For a strix to choose a human master?” Carnon laughed again.

“She is more the master and I the servant,” he said. “But no. No one really knows why certain people are favored by the strix. Like I told you, they guard the gates of the Darklands. Maybe Artemis decided I needed guarding.” I frowned.

“There were no gates,” I argued.

“What?” Carnon asked. Artemis hooted softly and flapped off, probably to hunt for more presents.

“When we entered the Darklands,” I continued. “I expected there to be gates or protections or a wall or something,” I said. “But there was nothing. How can they guard gates that don’t exist?”

“There are protections,” Carnon said slowly, as if considering how much to tell me. “Most can’t see them, or pass through them without a guide. That’s the benefit of having a strix at one’s calling.”

“So I could pass through because I was with her?” I asked, still not sure I understood. Demon magic seemed foreign and unnatural to me still, and I couldn’t wrap my head around the lack of balance it seemed to entail.

“And with me,” Carnon said.

“Do you have special royal permission or something?” I asked, snorting as I turned my head.

“Or something,” Carnon agreed with a smirk.

“Goddess, if I ever get a straight answer from you, I will die from shock,” I said, irritation mixing with excitement and anticipation. I enjoyed this strange dance of words between us, and the arm around my waist that seemed to tighten in approval whenever I lost my temper.

“That would be a waste,” Carnon said somberly. “It’s probably best if I equivocate forever.”

A strange lurch in my stomach made me frown when he said “forever.” It was unlikely we would be together much longer. I was going into the protection of the Demon King, and he would undoubtedly be sent off on more jobs or missions or whatever it was he was hired to do. A

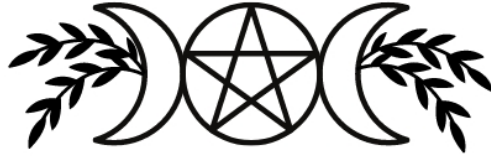
flutter followed the lurch, as I decided I should probably make the most of the little time we did have.

“Carnon,” I said, using his proper name for what might be the first time.

“Yes, Elara?” he asked, clearly smirking behind me. I wasn’t sure how I could hear a smirk, but somehow Carnon made it obvious. I cleared my throat.

“I’m still interested,” I said, feeling my heart race a little with the confession. His arm tightened around my waist again, and I heard his breath catch a bit as he leaned close to my ear.

“Then we’d better find a place to stop.”



Chapter 19

It was still several hours before dawn when we stopped at the edge of what appeared to be a town much bigger than the little villages we had stayed in before. The mountains were much closer now, and the temperature had plummeted as we had moved further east and begun to climb higher as we approached the mountain range. Carnon swung down from the horse outside of a sort of boarding stable, and he put a hand on my waist to help me down. I was stiff again from riding, but truthfully, it wasn't the only reason I accepted the help.

It had been hours since my proclamation, and longer still since I had looked Carnon properly in the eyes. I looked up now, meeting his gaze that blazed a deep green in the dim light. He gave me a heated look, then smirked.

"We'll have to go on foot through the city, I'm afraid," he said. I groaned, and he chuckled lightly. "I'm sure Akela would let you ride him, if you insisted." I looked down at the giant wolf, who whined at me as if offering just that. His head reached my chest, and I probably could ride him if I really wanted.

"That would be a sight," I said, "but I think I'll brave the streets."

Carnon paid a man to take the horse for the night, unstrapping the now much lighter bags of supplies and throwing them over his shoulder.

"Come on then, Red," he said, holding out a hand for me. I hesitated, which was ridiculous considering what I had suggested I wanted to do with him, but took it. It was large and warm, and he gave my hand a reassuring squeeze as he led me down the dark streets.

Although I couldn't see everything, light from a series of lanterns punctuated the dark streets, and I could see that the town was well maintained. I could make out clean, cobblestone streets and neatly painted houses in rows that seemed to be taller than they were wide, and there was

a place to walk lined with little flower beds and trees. A few businesses had lights on, but most were dark. The town clearly slept, and I felt an odd buzz of energy, despite the lateness of the hour.

I had never seen the witch capital, but I imagined it must look something like this, with buildings rising two or three stories, their stone exteriors in a variety of colors and shades, and flowers in window boxes.

“This isn’t Oneiros?” I asked, breaking the expectant silence that had fallen between us.

“No,” he said with a chuckle, still holding my hand as we walked. “Oneiros lies beyond the mountains. This is Asterra. Just one of many cities where demons and mortals live together.”

“Mortals live in the inner territory?” I asked, surprised to hear this. I had understood that a few demons might choose to live near isolated mortal villages. Mama had done exactly that. But the idea of mortals and demons living together astounded me.

“Yes,” Carnon laughed, sounding both amused and surprised. “Is that not how the witches do things?”

“No,” I said in wonder. The houses looked the same to me, and I couldn’t figure out which belonged to mortals and which to demons. I supposed I should have expected this, what with Carnon being a mortal lord.

We traveled through the streets for some time, Akela padding next to us contentedly like an oversized dog.

“Oneiros is quite a bit bigger and grander than Asterra,” Carnon said when we finally came to a stop in front of one of the houses. It looked like all the others, painted a pretty pastel shade that I couldn’t quite make out in the dark, with an elegant flower garden and a pretty stained-glass window inlaid in the door.

“You look like you’ve never seen anything like this place,” Carnon said. I looked over, surprised to see that he was studying me.

“I haven’t,” I admitted. “I was very isolated in the Witchlands. This place seems huge to me.”

“Don’t let it dazzle you, Red,” Carnon said, guiding me toward the building with a hand on my back. “This really is nothing compared to what you’ll see tomorrow.”

He fumbled for something in his pocket, finally pulling out a small silver key.

“Another inn?” I asked, letting him guide me inside the house.

“Not exactly,” Carnon said, turning to lock the door.

The house appeared to be uninhabited. White sheets covered what must be furniture, and a fine layer of dust was present on the uncovered surfaces. The house was dark, and Carnon lit an oil lamp, allowing me to see warm wood paneling and a wooden staircase that looked like it had seen better days.

“Where are we?” I asked, stepping further into the hallway and poking my head around a door.

“My house,” said Carnon, sounding a little uncomfortable. I turned, surprised, and raised my eyebrows at him.

“You live *here*?” I asked, gesturing to the covered furniture and dust and general abandonment. Clearly, whoever had been taking care of the exterior of the house had not ventured inside for some time.

“Not for a long time,” Carnon replied, looking around a bit wistfully. He had stuffed his hands in his pockets when I had let go of him, and he seemed a little uneasy. Akela whined sympathetically. “I lived here as a child, and the house is still technically mine.”

“Looks like you haven’t been back in awhile,” I said, running a finger over the mantelpiece and pulling it away to see a fine layer of grime coating it. I wiped my finger on my cloak.

“I haven’t,” Carnon said, sounding a little sad and angry somehow. I wasn’t sure if he would appreciate me asking about it, so instead, I focused on the present.

“Why did you bring me here?” I asked, watching him drop the supply bags on a shrouded table. He looked at me over a shoulder, the cloak still partially shadowing his face. He pulled down the hood, showing off the side of his head where the hair had been cropped short, then straightened and came toward me.

“First,” he said, as he prowled toward me, “because we needed a place to rest.” I felt the overwhelming instinct to back up as he prowled closer, but I resisted the urge and held my ground. Akela, perhaps sensing that this was his cue to leave, prowled into the room with all of the covered furniture and curled up on a shrouded couch.

“Second,” Carnon continued, stopping an inch away from me and pulling my own hood down, revealing my coppery braid. “Because no one will think to look for you here.”

“Both good reasons,” I said, a little breathless as he put his hands on my waist, drawing me closer to him.

“Third,” he went on, voice dropping to more of a purr as he leaned in so our lips were almost touching. “Because I don’t think your first time should be in a stranger’s bed.”

“It won’t be in *my* bed,” I said, voice a little thinner and breathier than I had intended.

“No,” he agreed, closing the distance between us and lowering his face so that his lips just barely brushed the shell of my ear. “It will be in mine.”

I shivered as he moved to cover my lips with his, the kiss gentle and coaxing, a promise of more to come.

“That being said,” he continued, pulling away from me and making me gasp in protest. He smiled, lifting a hand to cup my cheek. “This only has to go as far as you want it to. If you change your mind or want to stop or feel anything other than desire, we stop.” He brushed his thumb over my cheekbone and I flushed, uncertain about the right thing to do next.

“I...” I began, hesitating and biting my lower lip.

“Tell me,” Carnon said, that damned thumb of his still caressing my cheekbone. He was making it very difficult to think clearly.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I confessed, looking up at him with wide eyes that probably made me look more like a frightened child than a seductress.

“You don’t have to,” Carnon said, leaning down to brush his lips gently over mine again. “Just do what feels good. What feels *right*.” This last word was said with a purr that I felt shivering down my body to my toes.

“I don’t know what will feel right,” I confessed. Carnon looked at me thoughtfully, a mischievous light dancing in his eyes.

“What if I make the moves and you tell me yes or no?” he suggested, smirking down at me as if he had devious plans. “For example.”

He bent his head, brushing his lips over the pulse point of my throat. I gasped a little as his tongue and then his teeth flicked over the skin there.

“Yes, or no?” he asked, pulling back to wait for my response.

“Yes,” I breathed. He smiled and bent his head once more, taking the time to plant a line of kisses up my neck and across my jaw. His hand snaked around my waist, pulling the blouse from where it was tucked into the back of my trousers and flattening over the bare skin of my low back.

“Yes, or no?” he rumbled, caressing the bare skin with gentle strokes.

“Yes,” I breathed again as the other hand went to the back of my head and threaded into my hair.

“Yes, or no,” he said, a demand instead of a question this time as he pulled me toward him and covered my lips with his, sweeping his tongue into my mouth and causing a moan to escape me.

“Yes,” I breathed out when he released me with a chuckle. He took my hand in his, lacing our fingers and planting a kiss to the back, before drawing me toward the staircase.

“Yes, or no?” he asked, stopping at the bottom step and waiting for my answer. I smiled, reaching up on my toes to brush a soft kiss against his mouth.

“Yes,” I said.

As if that was the only permission he needed, Carnon scooped me up suddenly and began carrying me up the stairs. I laughed, feeling ridiculously dainty.

The rooms we passed in the upper hall were also filled with shrouded furniture. We passed by several until Carnon veered into one on our right, lowering me gently to my feet as he turned to shut the door.

“Wait here,” he said, brushing another kiss to my neck before taking off to move around the room. He pulled sheets from the furniture, revealing a dark wooden desk, an elegant armoire in the same shade of dark wood, and a large, four poster bed. It had been left all made up, dark velvet drapes hanging from the posts and a rich, navy quilt covering the bed. There was no lamp or fireplace for light, so he threw open the drapes, allowing pale moonlight from the waning crescent moon to dimly light the space.

“This was your room,” I said, turning in a slow circle to admire the surroundings. The furniture didn’t really seem to suit him. He reminded me of cozy couches and large fireplaces and fur rugs, not this elegance. “You really are fabulously wealthy.”

Carnon laughed, striding back toward me purposefully and pulling me to him in a deep, bone melting kiss. My hands went to his shirt, taking the same liberty he had taken with me and lifting the fabric. The feel of his firm, bare skin beneath my palms was electric, and I gently ran fingers over the ridges of muscle, eliciting a chuckle from him.

“You’re ticklish?” I asked, looking up at him with a smirk of my own.

“A secret weakness,” he said, gaze going warm and soft as he looked down at me. He pressed another gentle kiss to my lips. “You are beautiful, Elara,” Carnon murmured against my mouth, pulling back to look at me again, his thumb sweeping across my cheek as he cupped my face.

“I thought I was only ‘fine looking’,” I teased, blushing a bit at the compliment. No man had ever told me I was beautiful before, not in earnest at least. I couldn’t decide if the excitement and anticipation I felt was because of the compliment or because of his closeness.

Carnon laughed. “I’ve altered my earlier assessment,” he said, dropping his hand to stroke a finger over my braid and smirking. “I very much like this color.” He leaned forward again, pressing a soft kiss to my lips and brushing my nose with his.

“I was serious downstairs,” he added, lifting a hand to cup my cheek, his face turning grave. “Despite your big talk. If you have changed your mind, all you need to do is say the word.” I pulled back a little, frowning.

“Do you...not want to?” I asked, now feeling rather self-conscious. We were still fully clothed, and he was right. We could stop now, no harm done. But I really didn’t want him to stop.

Carnon raised a brow at me and took my hand, sliding it over the front of his trousers to prove that I had his attention still. He groaned a little at my touch, and it sent a fire licking through me.

“What do you think?” he rasped, pressing himself harder against me. “I have wanted you for a while now.” My heart rate kicked up and my breath became a little shallow as he walked us slowly back toward the bed.

“How long?” I asked, trying very hard to maintain the playful banter between us, despite the fact that all I wanted was his mouth on me, and mine on him.

“A while,” he repeated, smirking a little as the back of my knees hit the bed. “I think I love these freckles.”

“Since Beltane?” I asked breathlessly, refusing to let him change the subject. He bent to kiss me again, a little less gentle and a little more insistent in his demand.

“Before,” he said, pulling away for only a moment before moving his lips to my neck. “I’m wondering where else you might have freckles.”

“Don’t I smell like a horse?” I asked, suddenly worried. He chuckled against my neck.

“You smell like a moonlit night,” he said, still kissing my jaw and throat as his hands moved to the laces of my bodice.

“That doesn’t have a smell,” I argued, feeling heat flood me in extremely intimate places as he loosened my garments.

“It does,” he argued, tossing the bodice aside and untucking the rest of my shirt. He lifted his head from my neck and looked down at me, his eyes almost black in the dim light of the moon.

“Like jasmine and sandalwood and vanilla,” he said, brushing his nose over mine. His voice became a deep rumble, his chest rising and falling a little faster in tandem with mine. “I want to taste you.”

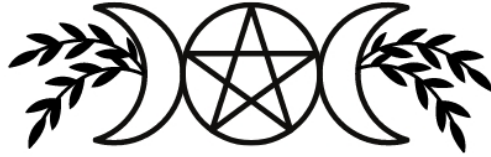
I flushed, feeling heat creep into my cheeks.

“You have,” I said, brushing my lips over his again.

“Not there,” he rumbled, running a hand down my backside and pulling me close until he was gently cupping my center. I gasped. “Here.”

Despite being a virgin, I wasn’t totally ignorant. Vera had told me a lot of stories. A lot. She had talked about the different things she had done with various men, until my face was as red as my hair. But still, the idea that anyone would *want* to put their mouth down there surprised me.

“I don’t want your first time to hurt,” Carnon said, face still close to mine as his hand moved back up my side. I was a little disappointed that he hadn’t kept it lower. “And the best way I know how to do that,” he continued, grazing the wandering hand over my breast, “is to make you feel very, very good first.”



Chapter 20

Carnon bent to kiss me again, flicking his tongue over mine as his thumb flicked over a peaked nipple. Even with a blouse and undergarments still between us, the contact sent a thrill of anticipation through me.

He stepped back a little, moving to the buttons of the blouse and looking at me with a raised brow, as if waiting to see if I would object. When I didn't, he began carefully unbuttoning the blouse, taking his time with each button until I was ready to rip the damn thing off.

"The waiting makes it better," he said to me, a smirk playing across his lips when he noted the tension in my shoulders.

"How many times have you done this?" I asked breathlessly as he released the last button and drew the blouse down my arms. I was wearing a simple silk camisole underneath, and it didn't leave a whole lot to the imagination. My breasts were smallish, not really needing that much in the way of support, so my undergarments were loose and simple. Carnon palmed a breast over the silk, toying with a tiny strap until it slipped down my shoulder.

"This meaning...?" he asked, still smirking at me between soft kisses to my jaw and ear and neck. He was making me blush despite the fact that I was really trying to seem like less of a blushing virgin, and he knew it.

"Ahh, look," he added, kissing down my shoulder. "More freckles."

"Sex," I said, the word coming out a little unsteady. "Am I dealing with a master or a novice?"

He chuckled darkly, moving to my other shoulder. "I'm more experienced than you," he admitted, sliding the other strap down and gently kissing each freckle that dotted my collarbone. "But not as much as many would believe. I have a reputation that I definitely don't deserve."

I frowned, wanting to ask more, but got sidetracked when Carnon gently but firmly pushed me to sit on the bed.

“Wait,” I said, unclasping Mama’s necklace. It felt odd to take it off after wearing it for so long, but it was heavy and I really didn’t want anything to be in the way between us.

“I’m not giving this to you yet,” I warned, handing him the stone. “So don’t get any ideas.”

“I would never,” he said, grinning as he took the necklace. He placed it gingerly on the desk and returned to stand in front of me, cupping my cheek in his hand.

“Now where were we?” he asked, brushing a chaste kiss over my lips. “That’s right. Freckles.”

He knelt before me, taking one breast, camisole and all, into his mouth while he used a hand to tease the other.

“Oh,” I gasped out, the new sensation surprising and delighting me. Carnon pulled back.

“Oh,” he agreed, turning his attention to the other breast. I probably should have cared about the state of my camisole, but it was very hard to.

“I’m going to take this off you now,” he said, his hands drifting to the hem of the undershirt. He waited until I nodded, raising my arms for him to pull the shirt from me.

“Gods,” he rasped, cupping my breasts in his hands and caressing each nipple with his thumb. They looked ridiculously small in his large hands, and I blushed again.

“They’re not much...” I began.

“They’re fucking perfect,” he interrupted, taking one peaked nipple into his mouth. It was warm and wet, and the flick of his tongue over the sensitive flesh did terrible things to me. “Don’t you dare criticize my new friends.”

I laughed a little, relieved that he was trying to keep this light. Fun. Fun was good. Fun was safe.

“No freckles here though,” he teased, moving to the other breast.

I allowed myself to put my hands in his hair as he explored, enjoying the bristling feeling of the side that had been shaved closer to his skull contrasting with the soft strands on the longer side. He looked up, eyes luminous as he gazed at me.

“Time for these,” he said, tapping my hips gently with his fingers before moving his hands to the laces of my trousers. I took a calming

breath. Already I was more bare before a man than I had ever been before, and I felt silly that this next part felt like so much more.

“You first,” I said suddenly, a permanent flush settling onto my cheeks.

Carnon paused his assault on my laces and looked back up, grinning wickedly. “As my lady wishes,” he agreed, standing to his full height and pulling the shirt over his head. The motion made me gasp as his firm chest and shoulders were finally out on full display. Before I had any time to admire him, for he truly was sculpted as if out of marble, he unlaced his trousers, pulling them down without ceremony.

Again, I was not completely ignorant of the male body. But this...I felt my heart speed up a little. A lot. This was far more...just...more than I had expected. He wore no undergarments, his arousal impossible to hide. I had never seen a man’s privates except in books before, and a strange part of me wanted to inspect them and learn their anatomy. Carnon did not grant me the opportunity.

“Your turn,” he said, returning to kneel before me completely nude as he returned to the laces. He pulled them down gently, letting me have time to change my mind if I wanted to. I didn’t.

Unlike him, I had worn undergarments, and I didn’t think they were the kind that were used for seduction. They were boring and functional, but something in him stilled like a predator when he took me in, almost completely bare before him.

“Gods,” he rasped again, placing his hands on my hips and running his thumbs over the edges of the garment. He was still on his knees before me, and the look on his face was that of a pilgrim finally arrived to worship at the feet of a saint.

“You are...” he swallowed, eyes darting over me like he wasn’t sure where to look. “Another freckle,” he murmured, kissing my hip tenderly. He glanced up at me again, face serious, none of the teasing banter between us at this moment.

“If I do something you don’t like, or that feels wrong,” he said, lifting a hand to cup my cheek, “tell me. You won’t hurt my feelings, or anger me.” My heart cracked a little bit at the consideration he was showing me. I doubted very much that many women received the same treatment the first time they took a man to bed, and the thought saddened me. It should always be like this—gentle and kind and patient.

I nodded, uncertain if “thank you” was the right response to something like this, and not sure I could voice it anyway. My throat felt tight with anticipation and desire and a tiny trickle of fear, not that Carnon would hurt me, but that this wouldn’t be the experience I hoped for.

He rose, leaning over me and putting a hand behind my neck so he could bring my mouth to his. Like his other kisses, it started soft and exploring, a question to make sure I was ready. When I didn’t pull away, it became more insistent and heady and intoxicating in its pull.

I scooted back, and he pushed me down gently, until I was lying on the bed, his body atop mine as he kissed me. The kisses moved lower, peppering my neck and my breasts, and then my stomach as he teased the undergarments off. He chuckled.

“Another freckle. And my new favorite color,” he said, voice husky as he admired the coppery curls between my legs. He bent to kiss my hip, moving down and across my thighs until I realized where he was heading. I willed myself to relax.

“Say the word, Elara,” Carnon said. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No,” I almost shouted, his warmth and scent and strong body perched slightly over mine, making heat pool very near to where his mouth was.

“Thank the gods,” Carnon breathed out a laugh, running his fingers through the copper hair between my legs, and stroking his thumb over the nub at my center. I gasped a little, the sensation different when it was another’s hand and not my own. Everything felt more sensitive. More raw.

He leaned down, kissing the hip bone on the other side, trailing more kisses down until he was nestled between my legs. He lifted them, bending me at the knee and pushing my heels back until he was as close as he could be without actually touching me. I lifted myself on my elbows to watch him, and he met my eyes once more.

“Is this where you touch yourself?” he asked, stroking a thumb over my center, voice rough with promise. “When you feel the urge?” I nodded, gasping a little as he moved his thumb over that spot.

“One word,” he reminded me, waiting for a beat before bending his head and parting my folds with gentle fingers.

The first swipe of his tongue was like both ice and fire, cold while somehow setting me alight.

“Yes, or no?” he asked, looking up and smirking at me over my bare stomach.

“Yes,” I breathed, throwing my head back as he returned to that spot, running his tongue through my folds as he tasted me like he had wanted.

I fell back on the bed, with a little gasp, not sure what I should be feeling and when, but enjoying his attention.

“Relax,” he said, pulling back and tapping my thighs gently.

“No one has ever touched me like this,” I whispered.

“Hmm,” Carnon said, rubbing his mouth and nose over me in a way that made warmth pool at my core and a fire ignite in me. “My first time,” he said, moving that thumb in slow circles as he moved his other hand to my breast to tease the nipple there. I moaned a little, and he chuckled. “I was so nervous I spilled myself before I was even inside my partner.”

“That’s embarrassing,” I breathed, my attention going to the places Carnon was teasing. I knew he was telling me this to relax me. To distract me. It was working.

“The next time,” he said, replacing his thumb with his tongue once more and swiping over me in a slow, warm stroke. He moved his thumb back to the spot and smirked up at me. “I couldn’t finish at all. I was too tense.”

“Same partner?” I asked, a breathy moan escaping me as Carnon replaced his thumb with his tongue once more. He didn’t answer for a long moment, too busy stroking through my center and teasing me. I dropped my head back, finally feeling myself relax a little more.

“Yes,” he laughed, raising his head again, his lips slightly glossy. With me, I realized. The sight made that fire he was kindling between my legs burn hotter. “Not for much longer after that.”

He dipped his head again, tongue moving in slow circles around my center.

“Gods, Red,” he said, running his nose over my center. I laughed as he tickled me, and he looked up with a smile. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but my breath caught a little as he looked at me with what seemed to be utter delight. “I could stay here all day.”

“Maybe you should,” I agreed as he returned to his task, feeling the undeniable urge to thrust my hips a little closer to his mouth. He let out a throaty chuckle and began to intensify his pace, licking and tasting me, adjusting his angle and position slightly as he figured out what brought me the most pleasure. A free hand rose to tease my nipple again, and I felt a rush of heat pulse through me, moaning out his true name.

He seemed to growl in approval between my legs, moving his tongue and fingers a little faster as he teased me. I felt tension begin to coil inside me as I finally let go and focused on the sensations he created. The feel of his stubble against my sensitive flesh was practically sinful, and the little moans and gasps I began to make embarrassed me a little, but encouraged him to move faster. I let myself spiral as he brought me to the edge of pleasure and finally, finally tipped me over. My hands went to his hair as I cried out, biting down on my lower lip to muffle the sound.

“I want you to be as loud as you want to be,” he growled, placing a gentle kiss to my folds and leaning back. “I want you screaming my name, Elara.”

I gasped out as he lowered his head once more, returning to the slow, even rhythm he had found part way through his first exploration. I moaned, breathing out his name, and forgetting which one was real.

“Hunt. Carnon,” I breathed, making him chuckle throatily against me. I felt him move his hands, sliding them down my body and over my thighs. One hand went to my buttocks, while the other slid between my legs and stroked the aching center of me gently.

He didn’t lift his head as he slid a finger into me, curling it gently against some inner part of me that made me feel tight and loose all at once. He pumped gently, still sucking on me in increasing intensity. I moaned as a second finger joined the first, taking me just to the edge of pain without pushing me over.

“Breathe,” he whispered, between soft, sensuous licks, pumping those two fingers until I was spiraling around him again, feeling like I had to move, had to thrust against him to get the friction I so desperately wanted. On the next swipe of his tongue, I was shattering against him, crying out as release shuddered through me, his fingers still pumping gently as he licked.

“Carnon,” I moaned. “I can’t. It’s too much.”

My protest contradicted what my body wanted, and Carnon didn’t stop, pumping and licking me back into a frenzy so quickly it was a little embarrassing. This time when I came I cried out loudly, winding my fingers into his hair with one hand and clutching the sheets with the other. Finally, and achingly slowly, he pulled his fingers from me. It felt cold and empty without his mouth and fingers on and in me, but a lick of heat speared through me again as he put his fingers in his mouth. He licked me

off him, keeping his eyes locked on mine and smiling sinfully as he bent down again.

He kissed up the length of my body, flicking his tongue over a nipple on his way up and making me shudder against him. I wasn't sure I could move. It had never been like that when I was alone, and for the first time I felt like I might agree with Vera. He continued kissing, moving up my neck to my jaw, and stopping as he hovered over my mouth.

"Yes, or no," he asked, lips still shining from what he had done to me. For me. I didn't answer, instead leaning up to capture his lips with mine. The taste wasn't unpleasant, and the knowledge that it was me covering his face sent a heady spike of pleasure licking through me.

His hand moved to my hip, bracing me as he centered himself over me. "It's been a very, very long time, and I've been checked by a healer," he said, dropping another kiss to my lips. "But we don't have to go any farther tonight if you don't want to."

I blushed, a little embarrassed that the thought of disease, or even pregnancy, hadn't crossed my mind. But I trusted Carnon, even though I knew it was too soon to trust him so implicitly. Besides, witches so rarely conceived that I was willing to risk it.

"How long?" I teased, lifting my hips a little so his hard length brushed against my center. He groaned with need, then chuckled darkly.

"Long enough that I'm worried this will be too quick," he replied, smiling ruefully down at me. He brushed another kiss against my lips. "Yes, or no?"

I only hesitated for another moment. "Yes," I whispered. He kissed me again, this time greedily, insatiably as he slowly guided himself into me. It was a little uncomfortable at first, and I gasped and tensed for a moment. He pulled back, gazing down at the place where we were just barely joined.

"Gods, Red. Elara," he said, pushing in gently as he said my name. He moved to my neck, kissing and breathing my name against me as he pushed in with aching gentleness. The sound of my name helped me relax somehow, and I softened for him, feeling myself part and settle around him as he finally seated himself to the hilt.

"I want to do so many terrible things to you," he said, pulling out a tiny bit, and pushing back in. I gasped at the movement, and he did it again, pulling a little farther each time as I got used to the feel of him. He was

definitely wider than two fingers, and my back arched into him as he hit a particularly sensitive spot inside me.

“So do them,” I breathed, reaching up to graze his earlobe with my teeth. He groaned against my neck, pressing a firm kiss there before running his teeth over my skin.

“I’m trying to be gentle,” he said, gritting his teeth. “Stop baiting me, Red.” I smiled, flicking my tongue over the shell of his ear.

He growled, thrusting in harder before pulling almost all the way out and repeating the movement. It didn’t hurt, but it took me a moment to breathe through the sensation of fullness.

“Gods,” I cried, clutching at his back as I wrapped my legs around his waist, trying to bring him closer. He braced a forearm on the bed beside my head, the other hand wrapping around my hip as he bowed his shoulders so he could kiss me deeply, claiming me in every way. The sensation was different than when he had his mouth on me, and I felt the tension spiral again as he moved, picking up speed with every thrust of his hips. I cried out as I felt him tense against me, his hips making one final deep thrust as he spilled himself inside me, burying his face in my neck as he came.

We lay there for several moments in the dim light, the sun just beginning its ascent as dawn approached.

“That was...” I breathed, not sure I really had the right words for it. Carnon kissed my neck, then my shoulder, then my lips, pulling back to look at me. He brushed a strand of red hair from my face that had escaped my braid, hooking his hand behind my neck and bringing his sweaty forehead to mine.

“Good,” he said, brushing a tender kiss over my lips again as he looked at me. A little smirk played at his lips, and he dropped his forehead back to mine, whispering, “and right.”

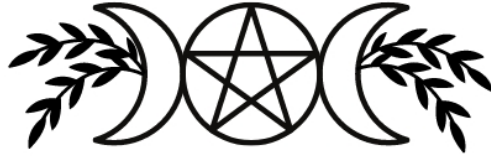
He held me for another minute, then rolled off me with a groan, disappearing through a door and returning with a towel. I blushed, holding out my hand so I could clean myself up. He pushed my hand aside, gently wiping away the evidence of what we had done himself. I let my head drop back on the bed as he tended to me, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and tenderness for this man.

“Is there blood?” I asked, feeling very exposed as he cleaned me up. He leaned down, pressing a chaste kiss to my thigh, which was somewhat laughable based on what we’d just done.

“No,” he said. “It doesn’t always happen.” He tossed the towel away and prowled over me again, pulling my bare body against his until he was on his back and I was lying with my head resting in the crook of his arm, my cheek on his chest.

The last thing I remembered before sleep claimed me was Carnon kissing the top of my head, murmuring tender words as I drifted away.

“You are an unexpected surprise, Red,” he whispered. “And I’m not sure I deserve you.”



Chapter 21

I woke up wrapped in Carnon's arms, the sun high in the sky now. It must be around noon, and my stomach growled, telling me that food needed to be on my agenda.

"Good morning," Carnon rumbled, his chin atop my head as I lay splayed out on his chest. I lifted my head slightly to look into his smiling face.

"Doesn't look like morning," I said, voice rough with sleep and possibly a little hoarse from all the moaning and crying out I had done in the pre-dawn hours.

Now, in the bright light of day, I examined what we had done the night before, turning it over in my mind. I was a little sore, and probably needed a bath. But other than that, I didn't feel any different, except for wondering why I hadn't experimented with men sooner.

"They wouldn't have been as good as me," Carnon laughed smugly, propping his head on one bent arm and grinning at me. I blushed, realizing I had said this last part out loud.

"You're very confident," I said, propping my chin on my arm, still lying across his broad chest.

He grinned. "I have evidence to back up my arrogance," he said, running a warm hand over my bare backside and sending a shiver through me. "You crying out my name several times, for one." He leaned forward, capturing my mouth and biting my bottom lip gently between his teeth.

"You tasted as sweet as I imagined you would," he purred, that hand caressing me gently and making me go all molten again. "And you felt divine."

"And what does divinity feel like?" I asked, smiling at his ridiculous romantic notions.

He cocked a brow at me suggestively, kissing me again. "Like you," he murmured, pulling me over him until I was straddling his body, completely bare to him. "Gods above," he groaned. "The perfection is too much." I laughed, smacking him lightly on the chest as he made a rumbling noise and pulled me back down for another kiss.

"In all seriousness," he said, his lips against mine as he held me to him. "Are you all right?" I nodded, brushing a kiss to his stubbly jaw.

"Perfect," I whispered, close to his ear. He held me for another moment before pushing me gently back up, holding my arms as he examined me.

"No pain?" he asked, studying me like I was his patient, rather than his...well, whatever I was.

"I'm fine," I said, putting a hand to his cheek. "Only a little sore."

"Hmm," he said, looking at me appraisingly. "I wonder if you could do something about that."

"With magic?" I asked, thinking of the chalk and crystal he had purchased for me sitting unused in our bag of supplies.

He nodded, frowning. "Not the kind I know you're thinking of," he said, running his hands up and down my arms.

"No thanks," I said with a frown. "I'd really rather not accidentally kill you."

"How the times have changed," he said, grinning widely as he rolled, scooping me up and plopping me back down on the bed. "There," he added, stepping away from me, still completely naked. "Despite the fact that you had ample time to kill me last night while I was inside you, I hope this eases your conscience."

I gave him a withering look, despite the heat that unspooled inside me at his words, and he chuckled.

"Try, Red," he said, crossing his arms and leaning on a bedpost. I shook my head.

"I don't want to use it," I sighed, looking down at my toes. The magic seemed to pool in me at the suggestion I put it to use, and I forced it back down.

"You used it on Akela," he pointed out.

"That's was different," I said, looking up to meet his eyes. "He was dying. He died. And it was my fault for attracting the leshy."

Carnon sighed, frowning down at me. “You realize,” he said slowly, “that if the Demon King can’t break it or remove it or whatever you hope he can do, then you will have to learn to control it?”

“That’s a problem for future-me,” I said brightly, trying to smile away my anxiety. Carnon rolled his eyes, bending down and kissing me soundly before walking to the adjoining room he had fetched a towel from last night. I heard running water, and realized he was drawing a bath.

I stretched, reaching over to the table to retrieve Mama’s necklace. I had felt lighter somehow without it on. Maybe the weight of what was waiting for me in the Witchlands, and the worry of Mama’s fate, was heavier than I realized.

I clipped the necklace back into place, running my fingers over the smooth, black stone. It hummed faintly beneath my fingers.

“Not that I protest this view at all,” Carnon said, making me spin to face him. His eyes flared wide and he swallowed. “Or this one,” he added, prowling toward me with mischief in his eyes. “But the bath is ready. I thought you might want to get cleaned up before getting grimy on the road again.”

He ran warm hands down my arm, making a shiver run through me as we looked at each other, both completely bare.

“Will you be joining me?” I asked, loosening my braid and watching him as I combed through the hair with my fingers. Carnon bit his bottom lip, as if considering.

“If you’re in pain...” he started.

“It’s nothing,” I said, blushing a little at my obvious eagerness. He grinned wickedly, dipping his head for a kiss and pressing himself to me. He was definitely interested in joining me.

A screech outside the window startled me, and I turned to see Artemis flapping furiously and pecking to be let in. Carnon rolled his eyes, going to unlatch the window and let the irritated strix inside. She flapped onto the desk, giving an irritable hoot. Carnon sighed.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing to the little roll of paper tied to her leg. Carnon untied it from the strix, who hooted again and flapped up to the pole between the bedposts, dropping upside down and burying her head beneath her bat-like wing.

“I will never get used to that,” I murmured, looking at her warily as she perched upside down.

“You will,” Carnon laughed, unrolling what I realized was a note. His eyes moved, scanning the letter for a few moments, before he tossed it into the fire.

“It’s a letter from my friends in Oneiros,” he said, returning to me and replacing his hands on my arms. “I sent Artemis ahead last night after you were asleep to let them know we’d be coming.”

“That was fast,” I said, raising my brows in surprise that she could travel there and back in only a few hours.

“She can fly much faster and more efficiently than we can ride,” he said, moving a hand to my lower back and turning to guide me toward his bathing room.

“Wait,” I said, turning back to the supply bags and pulling the pouch of witch elements from the bag. Carnon hadn’t bought herbs, and to be fair it was unlikely he knew what was used in witch spells anyway. I would have to buy some in Oneiros. If I had money.

I frowned, realizing I had no money or connections or anything except the faint promise of protection if I invoked the Horned God. And Carnon, in whom I was putting a lot of faith.

“What’s wrong?” Carnon asked, moving to stand behind me and look over my shoulder.

“Nothing,” I said, sighing frustratedly. “Everything.” He chuckled.

“Tell me,” he said, running his hands down my arms again. I felt myself warm at his touch, and the compulsion to unburden myself to him was strong.

“I hoped you would have witch hazel, which you don’t, and then I realized I have no money, and I don’t know what I’m going to do when we get to Oneiros,” I said, all in a rush, turning to face him.

“That’s a lot,” he said, frowning slightly. “Why witch hazel?”

“For my...discomfort,” I said, wincing a little as his eyes narrowed further.

“You said you weren’t in any pain,” he said accusingly.

“I’m not,” I reassured him. “I mean...” I looked up, seeing him looking back down at me with a raised brow and a skeptical expression. I sighed. “Not a lot.”

The frown deepened as Carnon’s hands squeezed gently once, then propelled me toward the bathing chamber.

“One thing at a time,” he said reassuringly, encouraging me into the small room. The tub was elegant, but not large. It was unlikely two of us would fit in there. “First, you're going to bathe alone.”

“But—” I protested. Carnon turned, gently placing his fingers over my lips to silence me.

“Second,” he said, “you’re going to remember that I’ll take care of you until the Demon King does. Whether I want to or not—and I promise Red, I *want* to—we have a bargain. You’re stuck with me.”

He caressed a thumb over my cheekbone as I flushed. I knew the real reason he was taking care of me was for the necklace, but I liked to think that it had something to do with me too. Especially after last night.

“What if the Demon King doesn’t agree?” I asked, apparently on a mission to poke holes in all of his comforting words.

“By invoking the blessing of the Horned God,” Carnon replied, looking a little grave, “you make him honor bound to protect and care for you until you either release him or break the invocation by violating its terms.”

I raised my brows. “How does that work?” I asked.

He smirked. “Get in, and I’ll answer your thousands of questions,” he said, giving me a gentle smack on the rear.

I gave him a rude gesture and stepped into the tub, groaning a bit as I lowered myself into the hot water. I felt immediate relief as tight muscles loosened and my aching spots began to soothe.

“Stay there,” Carnon said, as if there was anywhere else I could actually go. He was still completely naked as he went to the drawers and began rummaging for something. “Aha!”

He returned with a small bottle, which he opened and let me sniff.

“Lavender?” I asked, watching as he poured three drops in the bathwater.

“Probably not as good as witch hazel,” he said, “but this always used to help me sleep.”

“I don’t need sleep,” I grumbled. I winced, realizing I actually sounded like I *could* use a nap.

“You need rest,” Carnon argued. “At least, certain parts of you do.” He grinned, and I flicked water at his face, making him laugh.

“Lean back,” he said.

I turned to look at him suspiciously. “Why?” I asked, staying put.

“So I can wash your hair,” he said, matter of factly, as if this was some service he offered to all the women he shared a bed with. Maybe he did.

“I can do that,” I said, holding my hand out for the soap he was holding. He was kneeling on the bare stone floor, and it must be uncomfortable. “Really, you don’t have to stay if you don’t want to.”

“Red,” he said, breathing out my nickname as if I both irritated and delighted him. “I already said, I *want* to. Now lean back.” The smolder in his eyes at this final command had me obeying, and I submerged my hair in the water, luxuriating in the feel of strong fingers running over my scalp.

He tapped me to come up, and I obeyed, taking in a sharp breath when I felt his hands go to my head again and begin to work the soap into a lather. I let out a moan of pleasure that was completely unintentional, and flushed as he chuckled behind me.

“Easy, Red,” he said, a smirk in his voice. “This is nothing compared to what I have planned for later.” My stomach gave a little happy twist as he guided me back to rinse my hair, running his fingers through the long tresses to make sure he got all the soap. When I rose again, he pressed a kiss to my wet shoulder.

“Now,” he said, moving from behind me to the side of the tub, where he sat on a low stool. Everything was visible still, and I blushed again, feeling like I would be “Red” forever at this rate. “Ask me some of those questions.”

“Okay,” I started, trying to decide what was most important. I settled on gleaning more information about the Demon King. “This invocation of the Horned God. What is it, and what would I do to violate it?”

Carnon frowned a little, as if trying to decide what to tell me. I cursed my bad luck that there was no yarrow on hand for a truth spell. While I didn’t think that Carnon was really lying, he was definitely getting creative at omitting things.

“I told you that the Horned God is worshiped by demons, along with the Triple Goddess,” he said, speaking slowly as if still considering his words. I nodded, hoping he would continue. “The God represents duality. He is life and death, light and darkness, truth and lies, wilderness and civilization.”

“Okay,” I said, frowning as I received more of a theology lesson than I had hoped for.

“The Triple Goddess, as his consort, represents many of these things too,” he continued, watching me intently as I began to scrub myself with the soap. “She is the moon and sun and stars. Life and death and rebirth.”

“Yes,” I said, trying not to sound irritated. “I know all of this.”

“Okay, well,” Carnon said, raising a brow at my impudence. “If you invoke the protection of the Horned God, as your mother wants you to, you basically enter a binding contract with the Demon King. You give him access to your life and power, and, in return, he will protect you in the name of his God.”

“I still don’t get it,” I said, rinsing the soap from myself as best as I could. “How is that anything to do with the Horned God? And what do you mean about my life and power? I don’t want to do that.”

“You may not have a choice, Elara,” Carnon said. I noticed he used my real name only when he was very serious or very angry. I frowned. “The Demon King is said to be chosen by the Horned God himself. He is the representative of the Horned God’s duality, and as such, his powers emulate those of the God himself. If you invoke the God’s protection, you invoke the King’s, but something must be given in return.”

“My life?” I asked, feeling myself pale.

“Until the contract is broken or absolved, yes,” Carnon said. “Your living loyalty and powers and strengths are his, until you end the contract.”

“So,” I said, trying to think through the particulars of this deal Mama had insisted I make. “I can invoke the contract, but I also have the power to end it?”

“Yes,” Carnon said. “Demon bargains generally favor the petitioner. As long as you don’t violate the contract, the power to end it is yours.”

“And how would I violate it?” I asked, wondering if there was an easy way to escape this binding magical contract I was setting myself up for.

“By injuring him with the intent to hurt or kill him,” Carnon said simply. “Remember, demon magic is all about intent.”

“Is there a chance he will hurt me?” I asked, frowning and growing increasingly uncertain about this plan Mama had devised. I hoped I wouldn’t have a reason to hurt the Demon King, but I really didn’t like what “my power and my life” might entail.

“No,” Carnon said sharply, eyes flashing a little at the suggestion. “He will protect you with his life and treat you as a member of his household,

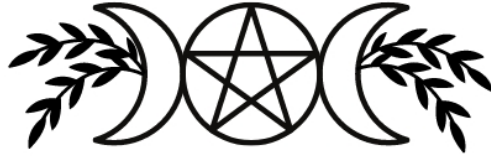
until the contract is fulfilled. His hurting you intentionally would violate the contract as well.”

“Okay,” I said, slowly, trying to absorb all of this. “And if I invoke the Horned God’s protection, does the Demon King get a choice?” I asked, looking up at him. “Can he say no?”

“No,” Carnon said with a frown. “Up.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” I said as I stood, letting the water sluice off me as Carnon wrapped me in a fluffy towel and scooped me out of the tub. I gave a little yelp at the suddenness of the move. He returned me to the bedroom and plopped me on the bed, kneeling before me. For a moment I thought there might be a repeat of what happened between us last night, but instead he took my hands in his, smoothing his thumbs over my palms and studying me seriously.

“When you invoke the Horned God’s protection, you create a magical bond with the king,” he said, looking up at me seriously, no trace of a smirk in the lines of his mouth. “You can be sure the Demon King will uphold his end, but be sure you are ready to uphold yours.”



Chapter 22

We left Carnon's home in Asterra as the sun was setting. He wanted us to make it to Oneiros by daybreak, and he had warned me that it would be a hard ride. It would get significantly colder and steeper as we neared the base of the mountain range, beyond which Oneiros lay.

"Will we have to climb them?" I asked, looking in horror at the peaks that seemed to scrape the sky. Carnon chuckled.

"If I said yes, would you abandon this quest?" he asked, helping me into the saddle. The horse snuffed as if protesting my weight, and I glared at it.

"No," I said. "But if climbing a mountain is like climbing a tree, we're in trouble."

Carnon laughed then, full bodied and melodious. It made warmth snake through me as he climbed up behind me, wrapping his cloak around us both as I shivered a little.

"There's a path through the base of the mountain," he said, voice still full of mirth. "But I'd quite like to see you climb a mountain, Red."

Akela and Artemis had shot ahead, apparently familiar enough with the road to Oneiros that they knew the way. We followed on the horse, jostled up and down in the saddle as we began to climb. Carnon gripped me tightly around the waist, and it was hard to think clearly, what with the combination of being bounced around relentlessly, and the warm band of his arm across my stomach.

I wondered if Mama knew about the requirements of this bargain she wanted me to make. She must have, and still wanted me to do it, despite the fact that I would be tied to the Demon King. I supposed I could release him anytime I wanted, which gave me some comfort, but if he threw me out of his kingdom as a result, I was as good as dead.

The horse slowed suddenly and I tilted back into Carnon, who chuckled.

“You’re thinking loudly,” he said in my ear. “I thought you might want to unburden yourself.”

“I’m fine,” I said, trying to sound unbothered. Carnon’s arm tightened around my waist.

“Talk to me, Red,” he said quietly, still keeping the horse at a slower pace. “What’s troubling you?”

I bit my lip, trying to decide what to say. “Do you think I should do it?” I asked, turning in the saddle to try to see his face. “Invoke the Demon King’s protection?” The hood covered most of his features, but I could see his mouth.

He frowned slightly. “I think your mother must have had a reason to tell you to do it,” he said slowly, biting his lower lip in thought. “And I know the king won’t hurt you, despite whatever you’ve heard about him from other witches.”

“Is he kind?” I asked, a little eased by Carnon’s assurance.

He snorted. “Gods, no,” he replied. “Kindness is quickly taken advantage of in a kingdom of magical beings. But he’s fair. He treats all with the respect they deserve.”

I noted that he didn’t say everyone was treated with the same respect, and I decided I didn’t want to know more about the Demon King right now.

“Relax, Red,” Carnon said with another squeeze of his arm. “I wouldn’t take you if I didn’t think you’d be safe.”

I frowned. “You’d have to,” I argued. “We made a blood oath, remember?” I held up my wrist where the thin red line of the binding oath still scarred my skin.

“Fair point,” he said, running a thumb over the scar and sending a shiver up my arm. “But I’d find a way around it if I had to.”

“I bet you would,” I said sarcastically. Carnon rewarded me with another chuckle and a peck on the cheek that made me flush.

“Hold on tight, Red,” he said, squeezing me again for emphasis. “Time to go fast.”

We rode at an uncomfortable speed for the rest of the night, and I shivered in Carnon’s arms as we sped toward the mountains, my ears popping as we climbed. The path became rockier as we rode, the horse

slowing a little to keep its footing, and the mountains loomed ominously above us.

Finally, Carnon slowed the horse as we approached what appeared to be a stone archway on the side of the mountain. It was intricately carved, the lintel carved with images of strix that looked eerily like Artemis.

“The gates of the Darklands, I presume?” I asked, twisting so I could try to catch Carnon’s expression.

He rumbled a little laugh behind me. “Something like that,” he said, stopping the horse and dismounting. He held out a hand to help me down. “Glad you’ve been paying attention.”

“Why are we stopping?” I asked, letting him guide me toward the stone pillars that made up the sides of the archway. Carnon withdrew his dagger, and I took a step back.

“The gateway to Oneiros demands payment,” Carnon said, putting his dagger between his teeth as he rolled up a sleeve. He took the dagger in his free hand and made a quick, shallow slice across his forearm, right above our blood bargain. Blood welled in the wound as he pressed it to the archway, leaving a rusty smear behind. I noticed that there were a lot of rusty smears, and grimaced.

“Payment for what?” I asked, as Carnon turned to me with the knife. The wound had already healed, like our blood bargain had. This was definitely some kind of blood magic then.

“Those who pass through these gates are protected by the Demon King,” Carnon replied, holding the dagger out to me. “But in exchange they must weaken themselves. It’s mostly symbolic, but again, intent is important here. You demonstrate your intent to do no harm by offering payment at the gates.”

I frowned, taking the dagger and wincing as I cut a slice across my arm as Carnon had done. I wiped it against the stone pillar, already feeling the cut heal over as I left my own red smear behind. The necklace hummed faintly, as if in approval. Or maybe as if in recognition. It was hard to tell what the whims of the shadow stone were, but it definitely wanted to be taken into the city. The coiling magical beasts in my gut gave a happy little flip, as if they too were excited to be here. I sighed, wondering when my feelings would be my own, and not subject to the whims of inanimate objects or magic I didn’t want.

“What’s wrong?” Carnon asked, wiping the dagger off and sheathing it.

“It’s just not natural,” I said, scowling at the demon gate to Oneiros.

Carnon chuckled. “It may be time for you to reevaluate what you view as natural, Red,” he said, smirking at me before dropping a kiss on top of my head. I looked up at him, and his expression was warm and fond. “Come on.”

He led me back to the horse and boosted me onto the saddle, swinging up behind me and pushing the horse into a trot. As we passed under the archway, I felt a prickling of my skin, like all the hairs were standing on end at once.

“It’s just the magic of the gate,” Carnon said soothingly when he felt me stiffen. “It’s checking we left payment.”

“What would happen if we didn’t?” I asked, seeing a long, dark tunnel loom ahead of us that I hoped opened out into Oneiros. The tunnel glowed faintly with some kind of ambient light that was both beautiful and eerie.

“It would have sent us back out,” Carnon replied. “Painfully.”

“Why are the walls glowing?” I asked, marveling at the faint silver glow.

“I see you have another thousand questions,” Carnon said, amused. “The mountain is made primarily of moonstone. It glows faintly at night as long as the moon is visible. As the sun rises, the glow will fade.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said, my voice filled with awe. I had never seen stone like it before, and Carnon chuckled again at my wonder.

“If you like this, wait until you see the palace,” he said. “It’s made entirely from moonstone.”

“Really?” I asked, twisting slightly to see his face. Even with the glowing moonstone, it was too dark in the tunnel to make out his features, but he must be able to see well enough to direct the horse forward.

“Really,” he replied. I was silent for a while as we plodded through the tunnel, the path still rising gently. Oneiros must sit in the mountains, based on how long we had been climbing.

“And will I be staying with you?” I asked. “In Oneiros? Or will I have to stay with the Demon King?” Carnon didn’t reply for a moment, wrapping his arm a little more tightly around me.

“Invoking the protection of the Horned God means staying close to the Demon King,” he replied slowly. “Probably in the palace with him as his

guest.”

“Will I see you still?” I asked, feeling like the question might be too forward. We had been together one time, and we didn’t have any kind of understanding between us. And, Goddess above, I had only known the man for about a week. But still, the idea of never seeing him again after having him as my only company in the Bloodwood and the Darklands made a pit open in my stomach.

“Yes,” Carnon said, squeezing me again reassuringly. “You’ll still see me.”

“Because you work for the king or something?” I teased, throwing his equivocation back at him to make myself feel better.

He chuckled, brushing his lips over the shell of my ear. “Or something,” he agreed.

The rest of the ride was silent, and the tunnel began to slowly fade as we rode. A small patch of gray light ahead of us told me we were nearing the exit of the tunnel and that the sun must be rising. My heartbeat kicked up a few notches as we drew closer, and my breath left me in an audible gasp as we finally emerged on the other side of the mountain.

“Welcome to Oneiros,” Carnon purred in my ear.

The view was breathtaking. The capital of the Darklands lay in a basin surrounded by mountains, like those we had just traveled under, and it stretched for miles and miles. The palace at its center gleamed faintly as the sun began to rise over the peaks, setting the white stone aflame with pinks and oranges and yellows.

The rest of the city gleamed too, many of the buildings seeming to be made from the same moonstone as the palace. From our height up the mountain, it was difficult to see roads, or figure out which buildings were homes, but the sheer scope of the city astounded me. Little parks and tufts of green were dotted among buildings, and a blue-green river cut through the city, disappearing into the mountains on the opposite side.

“This is not what I was expecting of a demon city,” I breathed, taking in the splendor that lay before me.

“What did you expect?” Carnon asked, voice still low in my ear as he watched me take in the city,

“I don’t really know,” I said, still in shock. “Maybe black obsidian and dark stone. Or a lake of fire, perhaps.”

Carnon chuckled. "Sorry to disappoint you, Red," he said, urging the horse forward on the path that led down the mountain and into the city.

We moved quickly, and I sensed that Carnon preferred not to run into anybody who might recognize him. I wondered if he knew everyone here like he seemed to in Mithloria, but it seemed preposterous that he could know so many. There must be thousands living in a city this size, and I realized that the demons must greatly outnumber the witches in the Witchlands. No wonder witches were so fearful of demons.

"While we are here, I think it's best we not advertise that you are a witch," Carnon said as we entered the city proper and began to wind through the neatly paved streets. A few people were up and about, and Carnon pulled up both of our hoods to keep us anonymous.

"Why?" I asked, trying to take in as much of the city as I could from my place on the horse.

"Let's just say that most demons feel the same way about witches that you have been taught to feel about demons," Carnon replied. "And there will be many more demons here than in the previous towns we have visited."

I nodded, trying to keep my hood up as Carnon wove through the streets. He must know the city well, for before long we were outside a shop that appeared to be a farrier, like the one we had visited in that first village.

"We'll have to leave the horse," Carnon said, swinging off the saddle and helping me down.

"More walking?" I asked, groaning a little at the stiffness from sitting on the horse all night.

"Just a little," Carnon said with a laugh. "Wait here."

For once, I listened as Carnon went around the building to knock on the back door. I heard faint voices and chuckling before he returned, tying the horse's reins to a post outside the building.

"He'll be taken care of," Carnon assured me, holding out his hand for mine. I took it, waving goodbye to the horse, who neighed skeptically as we walked away.

A hoot from above startled me, and Artemis flapped down to land on Carnon's shoulder.

"Where's Akela?" I asked, looking around for the big wolf. Artemis narrowed her eyes at me, as if annoyed I hadn't asked after her. "I beg your pardon, hello Artemis," I added.

She gave another disgruntled hoot and tucked her head under one membranous wing.

Carnon chuckled at the exchange. "Akela is probably already asleep at the house," Carnon said. "We'll be staying with a friend of mine, until we can secure you an audience with the king."

"A friend?" I asked.

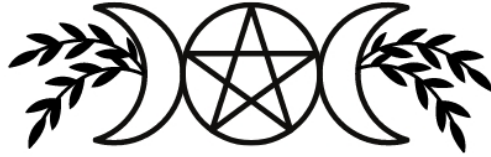
"A good friend," Carnon elaborated. "I have known her for many years."

"Her?" I asked, feeling a sudden ridiculous stab of jealousy.

Carnon chuckled, lifting the back of my hand to his lips and brushing a kiss to it. "Relax, Red," he purred. "She is happily mated. I assure you, she's not interested in me the way you are."

"Mated?" I asked. I had never heard the term used to describe a relationship before. "Do you mean married? And how do you know I'm even that interested in you?"

Carnon laughed again, leaning in to brush a kiss against my neck. "That's how I know you're interested," he purred, brushing his nose against the goosebumps that erupted in the wake of his kiss. "And I do mean mated," he added, "but the explanation will have to wait until later. We're here."



Chapter 23

We had arrived at a little house that was similar in build to Carnon's house in Asterra, although this one looked a bit older and a little less grand. Its walls were made of plain gray stone, not moonstone, and I surmised that we must be in a part of the city where demons or humans of average wealth resided.

Flowers lined the path to the blue front door, and Carnon knocked expectantly, pulling me close to him as we waited. Artemis squawked, flapping away to perch upside down on one of the window ledges.

"Are these friends...demons?" I asked in a hushed whisper. Carnon had said "mated," and I didn't think that was a mortal practice.

"They are," he replied quietly. "And they're perfectly kind. I suggested they glamour themselves so as not to startle you."

"Startle me?" I asked. Carnon just smirked as the front door opened and a petite, dark haired woman opened it, a bright smile on her face.

"Come in, come in," she said, stepping back and ushering us inside. "I didn't expect you to be here so soon, but everything is ready." She had a lilting accent similar to Carnon's, and she studied me with big brown eyes as Carnon removed my cloak and hung it on a peg next to his. She was delicate and very pretty, and again I felt an unreasonable stab of jealousy over whatever her history was with Carnon.

"You must be Elara," she said, holding out a delicate hand to shake mine. Her smile was wide, lighting up her face and eyes. "I'm so pleased to meet you. Carnon was somewhat vague in the note Artemis delivered. Akela is already asleep by the fire, the poor thing, and I've had the guestroom made up for you both. You must be exhausted." All of this was said in a rush as the woman went from shaking my hand to ushering us into a small but comfortable kitchen.

“Sit, sit,” she insisted, practically pushing me into a chair. She was uncannily strong, and I sat heavily, Carnon grinning stupidly as he watched this scene unfold.

“Thanks for letting us stay with you, Cerridwen,” Carnon said, gratefully accepting a steaming mug of something from the demon woman. She looked normal enough, but I supposed she would if she were glamourised. I didn’t see any horns or tail or fangs or skin like a snake, just mocha skin and curly brown hair that matched her eyes. She looked a little like Vera, actually, and I wondered what the magic was hiding as I accepted a mug of the warm drink. It was bitter, but I drank it anyway, not wanting to be rude.

“Where’s Herne?” Carnon asked, sipping the bitter beverage. Cerridwen put a loaf of bread on the table and began carving slices of it, handing one first to me, then to Carnon.

“He’s on patrol until dawn,” she replied, giving him a sidelong look. “Not all of us can get away from our duties as long as you can.”

“It was official business,” Carnon said, waving a hand dismissively.

Cerridwen snorted. “I’m sure,” she said, casting a look from him to me, then smiling warmly at me. “I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Cerridwen, and Herne is my mate. Carnon told us that he stumbled upon you needing help in the Bloodwood, but not much else.” She trailed off a bit at this, and Carnon stood abruptly.

“Storytime will have to wait, Cerridwen,” he said, indicating that I should stand as well. I stuffed the bread into my mouth quickly and stood, chewing thickly as the woman raised her brows at Carnon. “We’ve been traveling all night, and I think Elara might be about to drop.”

Surprisingly, I wasn’t feeling all that tired. A buzz of energy, similar to that I had felt at the other villages, had filled me, and I felt rather alert for having been awake all night. But I played along, pretending to yawn only semi convincingly, making Cerridwen raise her eyebrows at me.

“Fine,” she said slowly, narrowing her eyes at Carnon. “Keep your secrets for now. Herne will no doubt get them out of you later. You know the way?” Carnon nodded, taking my hand and giving me a swift warning look as we left the kitchen and headed toward the back of the house.

“What are you hiding?” I hissed as Carnon nudged me up a staircase to the second floor.

“In a minute,” he said, guiding me with a hand on the small of my back to one of four identical doors in the upper hallway. The room was small but comfortably furnished, with a tiny bathing chamber attached and a window that looked down onto the street. Carnon locked the door behind him, falling back against it and studying me.

“Well?” I asked, raising a brow at him and waiting for an explanation about why he had rushed me out of the kitchen. Instead of replying, Carnon stalked toward me, grabbing me around the waist and kissing me so fiercely that for a second, I didn’t even respond. Once my brain caught up to my body, I lifted on my toes, wrapping my arms around his neck and returning the kiss. It was fierce and desperate, almost like he had been restraining himself for hours, and I pushed back a little breathless.

“What in the name of the Goddess has gotten into you?” I asked, backing up toward the bed as he prowled toward me like a predator closing in on its prey. He closed the distance, pulling me toward him again and resuming the kiss I had broken. I let him kiss me another moment more before pushing him away again, panting.

“Carnon,” I breathed. “What’s going on?”

“Sorry,” he rumbled, pressing his forehead to mine. “You spent the night pressed against me on that damned horse. I’ve been waiting to do that since about an hour into the ride.”

“Oh,” I said, blushing a little as he brushed gentle lips over mine again, the urgency in him seeming to have been momentarily sated. “What didn’t you want me to tell your friend?”

Carnon sat, pulling me down onto the bed with him and lying back, keeping me clasped to his chest. “I think it would be wise,” he said slowly, “that you not tell anyone else who your grandmother is. Or who you are.” I looked up, only able to see his scratchy chin from my position in his arms.

“Okay,” I said.

He looked down, eyebrows raised in shock. “No arguing?” he teased.

I shrugged. “I don’t know these people or this place,” I said, feeling a little self conscious. Carnon propped himself up on an elbow and I did the same. “If you think it wouldn’t be safe, I’ll try to keep that to myself. Although I’ll have to tell the king, I expect.”

Carnon lifted a hand, brushing his thumb against my cheekbone. “Hmm,” he mused, stroking my cheek absently and looking like he was mulling over a plan in his head. “Cerridwen and Herne will probably figure

out you're a witch fairly quickly. Your magic smells different, although your demon gifts may throw them off for a bit."

I frowned. "My magic smells?" I asked, pursing my lips at him.

He grinned. "Like vanilla," he said, leaning forward to brush his lips against mine. "It's lovely, but obvious."

"Oh," I said, mollified by the compliment. "What exactly did you tell them about me?" I asked, wanting to make sure our stories aligned.

"As much of the truth as I could," he replied. "That I stumbled upon you in the Bloodwood, and that we struck a bargain," he added, reaching out a hand to stroke a thumb over the shadow stone necklace that had slipped out from beneath my blouse.

I frowned. "Will they not want it too?" I asked, lifting my hand to meet his on the stone. "You said these were valuable."

"Very," Carnon agreed, his green eyes flashing a little possessively as he watched me. "But this one has particular importance for me alone. They won't try to take it."

"What importance?" I asked, frowning at him.

He brushed his lips against mine again. "It doesn't matter right now."

I sighed, unclasping the necklace and looking at it one last time. I hoped Mama would understand why I gave it up. I put my hand over Carnon's, prying his fingers apart to drop the necklace in his open palm.

"Here," I said. "You fulfilled the blood bargain. You may as well take this now."

He looked at me in shock, then down at the necklace, running a finger over it reverently. I felt a stinging pain on my wrist as the red line of the blood bargain disappeared, the oath fulfilled. Carnon looked at his own wrist as his line disappeared as well.

When he looked back up at me, his eyes were gleaming with a different kind of light. Suddenly he sat up, pulling me with him, and holding the necklace out to me.

"Keep it," he said, lifting the ends as if to clasp it around my throat.

"What?" I asked, incredulous. "You've been wanting to get this from me since we first met!" I exclaimed, looking at him in shock. "You can't just give it back."

He smirked, bending forward to kiss me soundly, and pulling back so our lips were just barely touching.

“I think we’ve both known for a while now that my interest in you is no longer about the necklace,” he murmured, clasping the chain behind my neck again. My face heated as he ran warm fingers over the chain and down to the stone between my breasts. “Keep it for me?”

I looked up, seeing that this was a question. An offer. I nodded, feeling a little tight in my throat at the knowledge that he wouldn’t take Mama’s necklace from me after all.

“Just to be clear,” Carnon said, voice husky as he gazed down at my breasts, which were heaving a little as my pulse kicked up at his stare. He ran a thumb over the stone, shifting his palm so he was cupping one breast. I gasped, clinging to his shirt as he passed his thumb over my nipple.

“This is still mine,” he said, throat gravelly as he caressed me. I wasn’t sure if he was talking about the necklace or me, but I honestly didn’t care at that moment. “But I’m entrusting it to you. You’ll keep it for me. Always.” I nodded, letting out a little moan as he stroked again. “Say it, Elara.”

“Always,” I breathed, looking at the necklace still in shock. “Why?” I added, meeting his eyes. Carnon sighed, looking away.

“I would do practically anything for you at this point, Red,” he said, brushing a thumb over my nipple again. “Just...promise me you’ll remember that.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, sinking into him as he angled his lips above mine and brought them down in a bruising, relentless kiss. The necklace seemed to hum in approval against me, and the demon magic curled inside me. This was not like my first time with him, all gentle teasing and exploration and consideration. This was fierce and frantic and desperate.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he rasped out, making me whine as he stopped kissing me. He smirked, his hands working at my laces to tear off my bodice and then my shirt. He pulled the camisole off me in one rough move.

“Freckles,” he rasped, pressing his lips to my throat and my collarbone as he palmed both of my breasts, flicking his thumbs over the tender nubs. I gasped again, wanting more of him. Needing to feel skin against skin as I began to tear at the buttons of his shirt. He pulled it off, ignoring the buttons completely, then turning his attention to the laces of my trousers.

“I need you,” he rasped, pulling off the trousers, then realizing belatedly I was still wearing my boots. He growled in frustration, making

me laugh. It quickly turned into a moan as he gave up on the boots and pressed his mouth against my center, lifting me from behind as he slid his tongue over and through me. “Gods, Elara.”

My ankles were trapped by the trousers, and I writhed against him, trying to angle myself for maximum sensation. The fact that I was stuck seemed to excite him further, and he lifted his head, giving me a wicked look before lifting my knees over his shoulders so that I was caging him against me.

“Carnon,” I breathed, gripping at the bedsheets as he returned his tongue to me, circling over and over as he worked me into a frenzy. I felt the sensations in me spiraling, and bucked as I tried to get him exactly where I wanted him. I groaned as I felt his tongue sweep into me, thrusting as if he was trying to taste the very center of me. I shattered against him with a cry, release spooling out from me as he continued to lick and tease.

“Jasmine,” he rasped, pressing a kiss to my inner thigh. “And sandalwood,” another kiss to my inner knee. “And vanilla,” one more kiss to my center as he swiped his tongue through me again. I shivered as he lifted my legs, taking the time to finally unlace my boots and remove my trousers properly.

I propped myself up as he unlaced his own boots and trousers, eyes sweeping over me as I lay sprawled before him on the bed.

“When,” I said, my throat a little dry from moaning his name as I came. “When did it stop being about the necklace?”

He prowled over me, the hard length of him pressing to my stomach as he pulled me into him for another kiss. “When the rusalka dragged you into that river,” he said, flipping us effortlessly so that he held me to his chest as he lay on his back, my legs straddling his hips. “I realized that it wasn’t the shadow stone I was worried about never seeing again.”

I blushed, feeling his length press against my center, hard and demanding, and I wondered vaguely what it would be like to take him like this. I looked down at him, my braid hanging over my shoulder to tickle his chin.

He smiled, pulling the braid free and loosening the strands of my hair with his fingers. “Whatever you are thinking right now, Red,” he growled, “I agree.” I laughed, leaning down to kiss him as his confession washed over me. It filled me with a bubbling, tingling warmth, and he gripped me tightly, the kiss turning feral again as he captured my lips and tongue with

his. He pressed himself roughly against me until I gasped, sliding my hot, wet center over his length.

“Yes, or no?” he asked, guiding himself to my entrance. Instead of answering with words, I slid back onto him, feeling him part me as he groaned. I sat up, gasping slightly at the pressure as he filled me to the hilt, the different angle eliciting a new sensation than when we had been together in his old house.

“Ride me, Red,” he rasped. “Fucking gods, please.” His words stirred a fire in me, and his hands reached up to cup my breasts, thumbs flicking over the nipples as I moved. He groaned, making me smile.

“Is this okay?” I asked, breathing out the question on a gasp. I wanted to give him as much pleasure as he had given me.

“Everything you do is fucking perfect,” he groaned, throwing his head back in pleasure as I moved. I sped up a little, dipping my head to catch his lower lip between my teeth.

He took back some of the control then, wrapping one arm tightly around my back as the other gripped my behind, pulling me closer and faster, and pulling him deeper into me. I gasped as he kissed me, increasing his pace as he thrust into me from below.

I met his thrusts, moving my own hips in time with his as spooling, glowing warmth built in me again, making me pant and gasp between frantic kisses. I cried out, arching my back against his hold as warmth spiraled out of me in waves of pleasure. He followed quickly, spilling into me with a deep groan that I felt all through my core to my nipples.

I collapsed on top of him, our bodies still joined as he rolled us again, his weight was on me as he continued to kiss me fiercely. To my surprise, he didn’t stop, thrusting into me gently and eliciting shivers of pleasure as he moved.

“I thought men could only do this once,” I breathed, tilting my face so I could speak, as he turned his kisses to my throat.

“Most men can,” he replied, words rough against my skin. “But I am not most men.” He increased his pace again, pounding into me until I was crying out, the pleasure of his touch and his weight almost enough to send me over that edge again.

“I can’t,” I breathed, arching into him as he sent a curl of pleasure licking through me again. It felt good, but not enough for me to shatter once more.

“Yes you can,” he breathed against me, moving his hand to circle the sensitive flesh between my legs as he moved.

“Gods,” I cried out, not sure if I was cursing or praying. Probably both.

“Just one more, Elara,” he ground out, teeth scraping against the pulse in my neck. “Then I’ll let you rest.”

I cried out again as one hand caressed my backside and the other teased my flesh, all while he pounded relentlessly into me, seeking one final release. The tension built until it was almost pain, and I cried out in ecstasy as I came, magic pouring out of me and wrapping us in bands of light and shadow. Carnon groaned, capturing my cry with his mouth, and bringing me down from the high with firm kisses and gentle strokes.

“Put the magic away, Elara,” Carnon rumbled in my ear, forcing me to pull the demon magic back in, for it was that which had escaped. I gasped, feeling the magic snap back into place. He chuckled. “Good.”

Everything felt very damp and somewhat sticky, but I didn’t protest as he curled me against him, my back to his chest.

“That was different,” I breathed. “I lost control of the magic for a moment there.”

Carnon chuckled, pulling the blankets over us as I shuddered in the wake of our joining. He pressed a tender kiss to my shoulder, smoothing back the hair from my face as I felt sleep start to come over me.

“You are a constant surprise and delight,” he murmured, pressing kisses to my neck and shoulder as I begin to drift off, the feel of his arm around my waist a warm band of comfort.

“And I hope you forgive me for what comes next.”

Chapter 24

I awoke what must have been several hours later feeling sticky and a little sore, but strangely reluctant to move. Carnon wasn't in the bed next to me, but I was cocooned in a warm pile of blankets and still feeling rather boneless.

I thought I had imagined him saying more to me after telling me I was a delight, but everything from the last few hours felt a little fuzzy as I struggled to wake.

With a groan, I pushed myself from the bed, feeling rather hungry and uncomfortable, and cursing Carnon for so thoroughly ravishing me that I hadn't been able to clean up. The evidence of what we had done was still between my legs, and I hobbled to the bathing chamber, soaking a washcloth in warm water from another pipe in the wall and running it over me, sighing in relief. I should probably bathe, but I wasn't sure how to work the pipes on the bath, so I cleaned up with the cloth as best as I could, and dressed in the discarded clothes I had been wearing earlier.

There were food smells wafting from downstairs, and I was pleased to find the door had been left unlocked for me. Carnon must trust these demons completely. Did all humans and demons have such relationships in the Darklands? Such intermingling was frowned upon in the Witchlands, but four days in this land had taught me that I understood very little about the demons or their magic and culture.

As I descended the stairs, I heard a male voice arguing with Carnon's and sounding angry. It had the same soft, lilting quality, and I stopped to listen, holding my breath so I wouldn't be heard.

"A witch?" the voice said. "Are you out of your fucking mind, Carnon?"

"I am perfectly in my right mind, Herne, and you know it," Carnon's voice replied, somewhat stiffly for being such good friends with whoever this male was. "You would be wise to remember your place."

"I know my place," the voice, Herne, replied, growling slightly. "It seems to be you who has forgotten it."

"Carnon doesn't have a say in what the Goddess dictates," came a quieter voice I recognized as Cerridwen's. "Does she know?"

“Not yet,” Carnon replied, sounding weary. I heard the sound of a chair scraping against the floor and imagined that he had sat down. “But I have to tell her soon.”

“Or you can send her back where she came from and be done with it,” Herne growled angrily. “For all you know, she could have been sent to lure you out. To find your weaknesses.”

“She wasn’t,” Carnon said irritably, “and since she’s currently listening on the stairs,” he said this last part in a much louder voice, clearly to jolt me out of my eavesdropping, “I will ask you to drop it for now.”

I bit my lip and made my way down the stairs, worried that I was going to be in trouble over what I had heard. None of it surprised me, except maybe the part about me being a trap. I didn’t understand that. But I knew Carnon had been keeping secrets, so the fact that he had to tell me something soon wasn’t a surprise.

“What is it you need to tell me?” I asked, entering the kitchen and deciding not to even bother pretending I hadn’t been listening. Carnon smiled, somewhat tiredly, and Cerridwen made herself busy with bowls and pots as the stranger, who I assumed was Herne, glowered at me.

“Elara,” Carnon said, standing and pulling me in for a kiss. I was a little surprised he was being so blatant in front of his friends, but I supposed that maybe casual attachments were common in this kingdom. “This is Herne, who is far less scary than he looks,” he continued, gesturing to the great bear of a man who leaned against the table. He looked human, but something about his humanness was off, as if he resented wearing a glamour and had made it uncomfortable to look upon him on purpose.

“I am pleased to meet you,” I said, attempting to wrestle my hand from Carnon’s grip to shake the huge man’s. Carnon lifted my hand to kiss it instead, making Herne’s scowl grow even more fierce.

“You’ll have to forgive my mate,” Cerridwen said, poking Herne in the arm to force him to move from his perch by the table. “He has no manners.”

“No, I understand,” I said, smiling at her faintly. “We are imposing.”

Carnon scoffed. “We are not imposing,” he said, shooting Herne an annoyed look. “He just has too many opinions about things he can’t possibly understand.”

"I'm...missing something, aren't I?" I asked Cerridwen, who nodded at me sympathetically.

"It's nothing," said Carnon, with a final glare at Herne. "Come see who else is here." Carnon led me by the hand he was still holding into a small sitting room, where a giant brown wolf was taking up most of the floor.

"Akela," I exclaimed. The wolf raised his head, studying me for a moment before lolling out his great tongue as if to say, "Yes, I am here. You may pet me now." I laughed, running to put my arms around his neck and bury my face in his soft fur. He whined a little, licking my arm wetly. I think he was happy to see me, too.

"She has the wolf under her spell, too?" Herne growled. He had followed us out of the kitchen and was leaning against the doorframe, watching me suspiciously, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

"I didn't cast any spell, I swear it," I said, throwing a confused look at Herne, then glancing to Carnon for some kind of explanation.

"Ha," Herne scoffed.

"Ignore him," Carnon said, crouching down next to me and tilting my chin up to look at him. He brushed a thumb over my jaw and smiled tenderly. "How are you?"

"Well," I said, blushing furiously at the memory of what we had done upstairs.

Carnon smirked, brushing his lips over mine in the ghost of a kiss. "I can smell me on your skin," he rumbled, brushing his nose against mine and speaking quietly so that Herne didn't overhear. "I like it."

"Come and eat first," Cerridwen called from the kitchen. "Give the poor girl a break from your carnal desires."

I blushed deeper, turning what I was sure was a bright crimson. "They know?" I hissed, letting Carnon help me to my feet. "You told them?"

"I didn't have to," Carnon replied quietly, bending to whisper into my ear. "You were quite loud."

"Goddess above," I groaned, blushing again and turning to hide my face in his shoulder. He chuckled, dropping a kiss atop my head.

"Let them hear, Red," he said, tilting my face up to his again. "I want the whole city to hear you scream my name. To know you're mine." My stomach flipped, and warmth pooled low as he brushed a kiss over my lips. This man would be the death of me.

I let Carnon lead me back to the kitchen, where Cerridwen was pouring something warm into wooden bowls. Herne was already eating angrily, stew dripping down his bushy beard as he scowled.

“Really?” Cerridwen sighed exasperatedly at her mate. “We have company.” Herne growled, continuing to eat like a wild animal, and Cerridwen rolled her eyes. Carnon chuckled, accepting a spoon from Cerridwen and digging into whatever she had cooked. It was warm and spicy, and it seemed to heat me from my toes to my head.

“Now, Elara,” Cerridwen said. “Tell us about your trip. Uneventful, I hope?”

I glanced at Carnon for confirmation that it was safe enough to discuss our exploits, but he just looked at me with raised brows.

“Mostly,” I said. “We had a little trouble with some rusalka and a leshy, but Akela was a very effective guardian.” Herne grunted at this, but Cerridwen smiled.

“And I hear you met the Hag,” she said, sitting down to eat her own meal. “How is the old bat?”

“Vigorous and demanding as ever,” Carnon said, making me smile a little at the memory of the old hedge witch.

“And...” Cerridwen hesitated, looking at Carnon before continuing. “You are a witch?” I glanced at him too, but he just shrugged.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “But I don’t think I can go back to the Witchlands.”

“Because of the demon magic?” Cerridwen asked. I nodded. “Can you show me?” she asked again, holding out a round thing that looked like some sort of fruit. I looked at it confused, and she smiled.

“It’s a mango,” she said. “We get them imported from the coast.”

“It smells nice,” I said, feeling a little sad that I would have to wither the sweet smelling fruit. “But if you insist.”

I put down my spoon and focused, tapping on the dark, shadowy thing in my gut that reveled in death, and pulling it forward. The mango withered in my hands, turning brown and brittle.

“Holy Gods,” Cerridwen said, looking in wonder at Carnon.

He gave her a curt nod, then turned to me. “Now reverse it,” he said, raising an expectant brow. I sighed, turning my attention back to the fruit. I wasn’t sure how this would help me, but I was a guest. I didn’t think it would be polite to hide my magic from my hosts.

This time, I mentally willed the shadowy thing back down and called up the bright spark of life that lived in me. It poured out, coming easier than it had in the past, and bringing the mango back to life. Cerridwen and Herne stared open-mouthed, and Carnon looked on a little proudly.

“The magic is stronger,” he said, studying me carefully as I held the mango between my palms. “Probably because you’re here now.”

“What does that have to do with the strength of my magic?” I asked. I didn’t get an answer, as Herne interrupted.

“The lords of the courts won’t be happy about this,” he said darkly, shooting Carnon a long look. “They barely tolerate—“ Carnon cut him off with a look, and I frowned.

“Lords?” I asked.

“Of the four Daemon Courts,” Carnon replied. “Sun and Shadow, Beast and Blood. They help manage the realm.”

“Daemon?” I asked. “You mean demon?”

Carnon smiled, as if indulging a school child with a great many questions. Cerridwen took the mango from me and began slicing it.

“Witches and mortals have called the demons by that name for so long, it sort of stuck,” Carnon said, looking down at his hands before meeting my gaze again. “They couldn’t or wouldn’t pronounce it correctly. But the actual name of the people is ‘the daemon.’ It simply means beings of great power.”

“Daemon,” I said, twisting my mouth around the unfamiliar word. “Should I say daemon then, instead of demon?”

Cerridwen shrugged. “We use both depending on our mood,” she said, handing Carnon a slice of mango. “Most of us use ‘demon’ for the people, but ‘Daemon’ for the lords.”

“What about mortal lords though?” I asked, turning to Carnon, who was licking the mango juice from his fingers very distractingly. I cleared my throat. “I thought you were a lord.”

Herne choked on his food, and Carnon scowled at him. “Of a different sort,” he said, “and don’t worry about the Daemon Lords, Red. They won’t come near you, at least not right now.”

Cerridwen handed me a slice of mango to try, and I took it gratefully. It was sweet and sticky, and she was still looking at me a little warily when I had finished.

“What of your witch magic?” she asked, taking a seat at the table. “Is it true that you can fly on broomsticks and speak with cats?”

I laughed, turning to Carnon in disbelief. “Is this how I sounded when I told you what I knew about demons?” I asked.

He smirked. “You sounded much worse, Red,” he said, taking another slice of the mango and popping it between his teeth. His tongue flicked over the spot where juice dribbled over his lip, and my mouth went a little dry. I needed help.

“By the gods, Carnon,” Cerridwen said with a grimace. “Stop teasing the poor girl. Tell me then, Elara,” she added, turning back to me. “What kinds of witch magic can you do?”

“I mean, I can really do anything,” I replied truthfully, feeling a bit embarrassed that Cerridwen had sensed my distraction over Carnon and his damn lips. “As long as I have the right elements for casting and know the incantation that I need. Goddess-blessed magic requires preparation and invocation. It’s why I find this demon magic so...”

“Unnatural,” Carnon finished for me through a mouthful of mango. I shot him a scowl.

“Goddess-blessed indeed,” Cerridwen scoffed. “As if the goddess didn’t bless us with magic, just like the witches.”

“What is your magic?” I asked, curious what else demons could do. “Are you a part of one of the courts?”

“Court of Beasts,” Cerridwen confirmed. “Both me and Herne. But I can’t show you if I’m glamoured.”

I glanced at Carnon, who raised an eyebrow at me.

“I don’t mind if you drop the glamour,” I said, sounding more brave than I felt. “If I’m going to be here for a while, I should get used to seeing demons without them, yes?”

Cerridwen looked expectantly at Carnon, who shrugged.

“Up to you,” he said, leaning back in his chair and crossing one long leg over the other. Something in me made me want to climb into his lap right there, and he gave me a small wink and a smirk, as if he knew exactly what I was thinking.

“Okay, just remember, I’m still Cerridwen,” she said, looking at me like I might run for the hills. I braced myself, watching as her tan skin turned a darker brown, and huge, feathery wings appeared behind her, flaring out from her slender shoulders. Horns sprouted from her head,

short delicate things arching up from her temples, and her ears pointed and elongated slightly. It was odd to watch, like a veil was being removed. Clearly, these parts of her had always been there, I just couldn't sense them.

"Well?" she asked, looking as if she was prepared for me to bolt.

I sat in shock for a moment, before realizing my silence might be interpreted as rudeness. "That's amazing," I said, standing to walk around and see her wings and horns from another angle. I didn't touch because I felt like it might be rude to touch someone's wings without their permission. "Can you fly?"

"I can," she said with a soft smile. "I can also control birds, if I wish, but I don't like to if I don't need their help. You aren't terrified then?"

"No," I said, honestly. "I mean, I was expecting you to look much scarier, really." Cerridwen laughed, and I glanced at Carnon, who was watching me with rapt attention, as if studying my reaction.

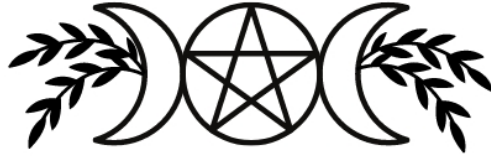
He noticed me watching and smirked. "Your turn then, Herne," he said genially, looking to the giant of a man who was still glowering at me over his bowl of stew. Herne huffed, then gave himself a shake, the glamour falling away far more immediately than it had for Cerridwen. Like her, he had horns, although his were much larger and spoked, more like a stag. His ears were also elongated, and his eyes became large and yellow like an owl's. No wings sprouted from his back, and I frowned a little.

"You're different," I said, looking between them. "Are demons from the same court not the same then?"

Cerridwen smiled kindly. "Each court has its own specialty," she explained. "Demons from the Court of Beasts have an affinity for animals, and often have animal-like characteristics. Some can fully shift into animals, but others cannot. Herne can see like a bird of prey, and shift into a stag, for example. I have the wings of a hawk, but I can't become one."

"And what of the other Dem—Daemon Courts?" I asked eagerly, fumbling over the word but hoping to learn more about this kingdom whose secrets had been kept from me for so long.

"If we are going to give her a history lesson," said Carnon, standing and stretching in a way that made me think of silk sheets and candlelight. He smirked at me again, and I blushed. "Then let's take her out for some practical instruction."



Chapter 25

By “practical instruction,” Carnon meant showing me around the city, where most of the demons would be unglamoured.

Cerridwen explained that demons often wore glamours in the outlying villages and towns because there were more mortals, and some were not used to seeing demons regularly. But Oneiros was evenly populated between demons and mortals, so most didn't bother with it.

I was glad that she used the word for demons I had been raised knowing. It made it easier to not have to think about my choice of words every time I asked a question.

I pulled my cloak around me a little closer in the chill evening air. It wasn't as cold as I thought it would be, being surrounded by snow-capped mountains, but it wasn't as warm as I was used to in the Witchlands. Carnon threw an arm around me protectively as we walked—I think both to keep me warm and to keep me from running off to look at things. Akela kept pace next to me, my loyal watch-wolf, and Cerridwen walked on Carnon's other side.

Herne had stayed behind, claiming to be tired from working all day. “Unlike some people,” he growled, giving me and Carnon a pointed look.

Cerridwen had gone with him to “say goodnight” which took considerably longer than it ought.

“What does it mean, that they're mates?” I asked Carnon as we waited for Cerridwen to return. He took my hand in his, twining our fingers together.

“It means they are each other's perfect match,” he replied, looking down at me. “For demons, mating is a bond that is soul deep. Many wait centuries to find their mate, the one destined to be their equal.”

“Who decides this is their destiny?” I asked, frowning. For witches there was no concept of long-term relationships, and mating seemed a

strange practice to me. Then again, what did I know? My only romantic experience was with a man I had only known a few days. My stomach flipped a little uncomfortably at the thought. Not because I regretted anything we had done, but because I was worried I might be getting too attached to someone I still barely knew.

“The Goddess,” Carnon said simply. “She is the patron of love, marriage, and childbirth.”

“Childbirth? I asked. The same was true of the Goddess in witch theology, and it surprised me how much our two understandings of the goddess had in common.

“Only mated pairs can have offspring,” Carnon explained, making me blush again like an inexperienced virgin. I was certainly inexperienced, even if Carnon had taken care of the virgin part. He smiled, amused at my discomfort.

“Do Cerridwen and Herne...” I began. Carnon shook his head.

“Not yet,” he said. “It can take several decades. Sometimes centuries.” I frowned, discovering yet another thing we had in common.

The streets were busy as we walked, with many coming from work or going to dinner, or other places. Carnon explained there were several restaurants and theaters in the city, and I mentioned that I had never been to either kind of place. Vera had told me about them in the witch capital, lamenting that her aunt wouldn’t take her more often. Carnon’s brows shot up at my confession, and Cerridwen began a lengthy lecture about the best shows and places to eat in the city, naming herself my guide to all things Oneiros.

There were hundreds of people out and about, both demons and mortals alike. It was strange to me, seeing them living and working in harmony, after being told that the demons had tortured mortals and fed on their fears.

“What’s that look?” Carnon asked me, watching me take in the city.

“It’s just,” I said, watching as some mortal children laughed and clapped at a demon doing magic for them, and mortals haggling merrily with a horned shop keeper. “I was told that demons fed on mortals’ fears. But none of these mortals seem afraid.”

Cerridwen laughed. “Who told you that bullshit?” she asked. “We don’t feed on mortal fears. If anything, it’s the opposite.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, as Carnon squeezed my hand a little more tightly.

“Demons feed on mortal *dreams*,” Cerridwen declared. “The better the dream, the better the magic.”

“What?” I asked, aghast at this idea. “And the mortals know?”

“Of course,” Cerridwen said, frowning at me and then Carnon. “Did you tell her nothing before bringing her here?”

“It didn’t come up,” Carnon said, sounding completely unconcerned about this new revelation. Cerridwen rolled her eyes in a fair imitation of Carnon, pushing him out of the way so she could walk next to me. He smirked, falling into step behind us.

“Mortals and demons have a...” she hesitated, searching for the words, “symbiotic relationship. The energy from mortal dreams fuels our magic and gives us power. Good dreams work best, so it’s important to all of us that mortals be treated kindly and with respect.”

I frowned. Again, this was so different from what I had been led to believe in the Witchlands, where Vera had told me stories of demons eating babes and torturing mortals for sport.

“And is kind treatment what they get in return?” I asked.

“No,” Cerridwen said. “Although I’m guessing it’s more than they get in the Witchlands.” I pursed my lips, not wanting to confirm what she said as true, even though I knew it was. Mortals were at the bottom of the hierarchy in the Witchlands. “For whatever reason, living with demons grants the mortals longer lives, and makes them less susceptible to sickness,” Cerridwen said, continuing her lecture on demon magic. “Mortals sometimes live up to two centuries here, if they take care of themselves. So it benefits both of us.”

I frowned. Mortals were lucky to live seven decades in the Witchlands. I had more questions, but Cerridwen suggested we get coffee and study the demons who passed so she could explain their courts to me, and I didn’t want to turn down free information if she was willing to offer it.

Coffee turned out to be the bitter drink I hadn’t liked earlier, but Cerridwen suggested adding cream and sugar, which helped immensely.

“Demons from the Court of Blood are known for their blood magic,” Cerridwen explained, pointing out a pair of demons with much longer canines than even she or Herne had. “They drink blood to fuel their spells.”

“Whose blood?” I asked, eyes wide with horror. Cerridwen laughed. “Mostly their mates’, or people they pay. It’s been illegal for demons to take unwilling blood for a decade now.”

“Only a decade?” I asked.

Cerridwen nodded. “The previous king outlawed the practice,” she explained, glancing at Carnon, who frowned at the direction this conversation had taken. He was sitting with an ankle crossed over a knee, looking like a perfectly poised gentleman, except for the bow and dagger he had insisted on bringing along.

“And the current king upheld the ban when he was crowned. He is more progressive than some of his predecessors,” she continued, sipping her coffee and glancing at Carnon again, who raised an indolent brow at her.

“Carnon said the king isn’t kind,” I argued. I glanced between them at the snort of laughter she gave, feeling confused.

“Oh, he’s not,” she agreed. “But he is fair.” Carnon raised his eyebrows at me with a smirk, and sipped his coffee innocently.

“What about the other two courts?” I asked. “Sun and Shadow?”

Cerridwen craned her neck and finally pointed to a blue-skinned demon who seemed to be weaving darkness on a loom in front of a small crowd of onlookers.

“Shadow is just how it sounds,” she said, “they weave shadows and darkness. Some can walk through them.” Cerridwen turned her attention to a street vendor who was spit-roasting meat to sell. I realized the fire for the meat was coming from the vendor’s fingers.

“That’s a Sun demon,” Cerridwen said. The vendor looked totally human, except for her eyes which seemed to be fire themselves, and the short horns protruding from her head. “Again, some can do more with light than simply create fire.”

“What about what I can do?” I asked. “The life and death stuff.” Cerridwen pursed her lips, glancing at Carnon, who had gone extremely still. I almost thought he shook his head, but I must have imagined it.

“No Court can do that,” Cerridwen said finally, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Those are the powers of the gods. Don’t show anyone else, except the king. Promise?” She looked so panicked by the idea that I nodded, deciding not to press her further.

“So,” I said, dropping my voice low to match hers, “if that’s not demon magic, but the darkness is, then how did I get it?” Cerridwen glanced at Carnon again, pursing her lips.

“I don’t know exactly, Red,” he said, putting his hand on top of mine and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Yet. But we are going to try to find out.”

I was utterly enchanted by the demon city, and whined like a child when Carnon declared it was time to retire.

“But I’ve never seen a play,” I argued, as he dragged me back to the house, Akela butting my legs in solidarity with his master.

“And Cerridwen can take you to one another day,” Carnon said, shooting his friend an irritated look. “But you have a potentially long day tomorrow, and you can’t go running around an unfamiliar city all night.”

“Cerridwen can take me,” I chirped, turning to her for solidarity. She laughed ruefully.

“Another time, I would love to Elara,” she said yawning widely, her feathery wings flaring as she stretched. I realized I hadn’t even been paying attention to the wings or the horns most of the night. “But I’m beat, and I do have to work tomorrow.”

“Fine,” I sighed, putting on a show of pouting that made Cerridwen laugh and Carnon roll his eyes at me.

“I like her,” Cerridwen said, bumping Carnon’s shoulder with hers. She smiled warmly at me, and I wondered if there was a chance we could become friends.

“I had a feeling you would,” Carnon grumbled irritably. “Bats of a feather and all.”

We said goodnight to Cerridwen at the landing of her house in whispers, as Herne was snoring loudly at the end of the hall. Once Carnon had locked our door, I launched myself into his arms, pressing a smacking kiss to his lips and hugging him tightly.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling his arms wrap around me in return.

“Not that I object to this,” Carnon said, laughing as he hugged me close, “but for what, Red?” I looked up at him, leaning back a little so I could see his face. He quirked a brow at me.

“For taking me to see the city,” I said. “For bringing me here. I don’t know,” I said, suddenly feeling a little foolish and not sure I could put my thoughts into words. “I just feel alive for the first time. I know that doesn’t make sense, and I know I should be terrified of my grandmother and your king and worried for Mama, but...”

“But what?” he pressed, running strong fingers through my hair, which I had kept loose all night.

“But I think I...like it here,” I said, breathing out a sigh. “And maybe I shouldn’t. But I do. Is that strange?”

“I think it has a lot to do with the demon magic inside you, actually,” Carnon said slowly, sitting down on the bed and pulling me down to sit next to him. “Do you remember Cerridwen saying that demon magic is fueled by mortal dreams?”

“Yes,” I laughed. “That was literally only an hour or two ago.” Carnon flicked my nose playfully for my sass.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about this for a while,” he confessed, looking at me a little strangely. “You told me that you saved a child with your magic,” Carnon said, lifting a hand to my cheek, “when it first emerged. Were you in a mortal village? At night?”

“I...” I trailed off, remembering the strange buzz of energy I had felt that night at Marie’s cottage. “I was feeding on their dreams?” I asked in horror.

“The magic in you was,” he said, stroking a thumb over my cheekbone. “I’m guessing it’s why your mother took you. She must have suspected. Demon magic emerges the day a demon turns their first quarter century. You said it was your birthday, yes?”

“Yes,” I said.

Carnon was quiet for a long moment, watching me struggle to process. “Are you alright?” he asked finally, frowning down at me. I breathed out, looking up at him. He looked so handsome and warm. All I really wanted to do was bury myself within him and ignore whatever truth Mama had clearly been hiding.

“You think she knew?” I asked, looking up at him and feeling the sting of tears. He brushed one away with his thumb.

“I don’t know for sure, Red,” he said, looking at me gently, as if I were suddenly something fragile that might break if he wasn’t careful. “But yes.”

She had known about the demon magic. Had kept me far away from my grandmother to hide me. Had taken me to a mortal village to test me. She had a basket full of provisions, far more than she needed for a home birth. I loved Mama, but right now, I was furious with her. The necklace warmed slightly, and I brushed my fingers over the stone.

“Mama has *so much* explaining to do,” I snarled. “Am I doing it now? Feeding on dreams, I mean.”

“It’s not something demons can control, Red,” Carnon said, frowning at me. “It’s not like you’re stealing them. The energy from dreams just fuels your magic.”

“This is *not* my magic,” I snapped, whirling on him. I knew I was taking my anger out on him unfairly, but I wasn’t exactly able to think clearly.

“Why are you so upset?” Carnon asked, standing and striding toward me. He put his hands on my shoulders, looking down at me with concern. “You haven’t done anything wrong, Red.”

“I just...” I sighed, blowing out a breath. “I have been a witch all my life. I can’t be a demon.”

“I didn’t say you were, Red,” Carnon said, pulling me to him and wrapping his arms around me in a comforting embrace. “But clearly some of the magic in you is. We just have to figure out how and why.”

“And how to get rid of it,” I added.

“Or control it,” Carnon countered, his brow raised at me in challenge.

“Agree to disagree,” I said, crossing my arms and glaring at him. He laughed and I sighed again. “I just wish I could talk to my mother about all this,” I added finally. “I have no idea if she’s okay, or what she knows, and I’m angry at her for keeping so many secrets from me.”

Carnon pursed his lips, a clouded expression coming over him.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s just...sometimes the ones who love you keep secrets to protect you.” He rubbed a hand down my arm soothingly, and I frowned.

“I just wish I could make her explain,” I said, feeling suddenly a little hopeless. “Or know she is alright.”

Carnon raised his brows, a realization dawning on his face. “Didn’t you say that witches could travel and communicate by mirror?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “But you need specific supplies and a witch mirror, which I seriously doubt we will find here.”

“And if we could find one?” he asked slowly. “Would you want to try to reach her?”

“Yes,” I said. “But she would have to be near a mirror as well, and it could be dangerous if my grandmother was nearby.”

“Then let me help you,” Carnon said, looking down at me with warm green eyes. The dark hair fell across his forehead a little as he looked at me, and warmth pooled in my stomach. “Tomorrow, let’s go to the market and see if we can find what you need.”

“Really?” I asked, looking up at him hopefully.

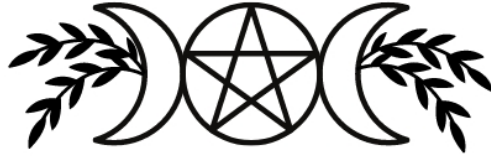
“Really,” he said, cupping my cheek and stroking my cheekbone with his thumb again. “We won’t be able to get an audience with the king until the next day anyway.”

“What?” I asked, surprised by this news. “How do you know?”

“I asked around at the coffee shop,” he shrugged, turning to sit on the bench at the end of the bed to remove his boots. “He’s been gone, but he’s supposed to return the day after tomorrow.”

“So,” I said, feeling a flush creep up my cheeks. “So you're stuck with me for two more nights?”

Carnon looked up, his grin turning a little feral. “Think how much I’ll be able to teach you in that time.”



Chapter 26

I was awoken in the most delicious way possible, with Carnon kissing his way down my naked body. He had definitely taught me some tricks the night before, and I had a feeling he planned to do more “teaching” this morning.

“Do you never sleep?” I yawned, luxuriating in the feel of his hair between my fingers. He looked up at me, grinning from where he was poised over my stomach, placing gentle kisses to my navel.

“How could I possibly sleep with you naked in my bed?” he asked, pressing kisses to my stomach and my sternum as he made his way back up my body. “Gods, how are you so fucking perfect?”

I blushed as he bent to kiss me, this one slow and languid, as if there weren’t a clock ticking down our minutes together.

“How often will I see you?” I asked quietly. “After I ask the king for his protection?”

Carnon’s eyes met mine, his gaze steady and contemplative. “I don’t know,” he said at last, brushing another kiss over my lips. “But every day, if I can manage it.”

My heart gave a little leap at this suggestion. I wondered if Vera had ever felt as attached to her conquests as I did to Carnon. I knew it was dangerous, letting myself get attached. But apparently he would live longer in this kingdom than in mine, so maybe...

“Gods, Red,” Carnon said, chuckling. “You look like you’re planning to go to war, not to meet the Demon King.”

“Sorry,” I said, smiling faintly and returning his kiss. “I’ll just...miss this, I suppose.”

Carnon smiled, the look turning heated. “If I get my way,” he said, voice low as he bent to flick his tongue over the shell of my ear, “there won’t be anything to miss.”

“Carnon,” I said, feeling silly for the question I was about to ask, especially since his tongue was doing terrible things to my ear. “What am I to you?”

He stilled, pushing himself up a little to look down at me. “What am I to you, Red?” he countered, giving me one of his typical non-answers.

“Currently you’re an alarm clock,” I said a little irritably. He chuckled, moving back down my body with slow, languorous kisses.

“Hmmm, what are you to me?” he asked, punctuating the sentence with kisses across my belly. “A distraction.” Kiss. “A delight.” Another kiss. He looked up then, his smirk a little wicked. “An excellent student.” I pushed at his head playfully, and he laughed. “An interesting problem I have yet to solve,” he finished looking up at me again. “But a challenge I gladly accept, freckles and all.”

“So, lovers?” I asked, feeling strangely anxious about his answers, which were, as always, not really answers. He smiled, this time full and warm instead of his wicked smirk.

“Lovers,” he agreed. “Does this mean you won’t be running around finding other men to teach you the ways of lovemaking?” he asked, raising a brow at me. I wrinkled my nose, and he laughed.

“‘The ways of lovemaking’ makes it sound like an art form,” I said wryly, running my fingers through the longer side of his hair again. Carnon pretended to look affronted.

“Have I not been creating art with you?” he jested, his smile morphing into that wicked smirk again. “Allow me to try harder.” He dipped his head between my legs, stroking firmly with his tongue and making me gasp out. I arched into him, no longer tense or anxious as he pleased me in what had become a familiar and exceedingly enjoyable way over the last few days.

“Does this mean that I’ll be your only canvas for the foreseeable future?” I asked, gasping out a breath as he teased me apart with a firm finger.

“Believe me,” he said, curling his finger gently and making me arch into him. “I have no intention of making art with anyone else.” He renewed his focus on me, and I let him, feeling the tension coil in me as he moved his finger and his tongue, sometimes in unison and sometimes at odds, until I was bursting at the seams with need.

“Please,” I breathed, as he continued his torturous rhythm.

“Tell me what you want, Red,” he said between sweeps of his tongue. I flushed, but I was too far gone to feel that embarrassed.

“More,” I said. “Faster.” I felt Carnon smile against me as he allowed a second finger to part me, and the pressure was enough to send me over the edge. I cried out, gripping his hair with one hand and the bedsheets with the other as he licked me through my release.

“Art,” Carnon said, in a satisfied way, as he prowled up the bed and positioned himself over me.

“Wait,” I breathed, putting a hand on his chest. He stilled. “I want to try something.” Carefully I raised myself, pushing him back down on the bed. He was fully naked and extremely ready, and my throat dried out a little, not sure if I really knew what I was doing here.

“What do you want to try, Red?” he asked, propping himself up on his elbows, one knee raised while his other leg remained flat on the bed. I bit my lower lip.

“This,” I said, bending down and kissing a spot on his bare thigh. “You have a freckle here,” I pointed out, kissing from that tiny spot to his length, which was very, very excited about my mouth being so close. I licked up the column of his length, which jerked slightly as I closed my mouth over the tip.

“Fuck,” he breathed, as I turned so I was straddling his legs. I wanted to be able to watch his face, and his eyes were currently feral. “You don’t have to do that, Red.” I swirled my tongue over the tip, beads of salty moisture already gathering there, and he groaned.

“I want to,” I said, giving him a little smirk of my own. “But you’ll have to teach me.” I lowered my mouth over him again, swirling my tongue around him and over him, trying to figure out what he liked.

“You might be a natural,” he breathed out, falling back with a groan that made me smirk wider. “Gods, Red, just do whatever the hell you want down there.” I laughed, choking a little with my mouth around him, causing him to buck a bit.

“Elara,” he breathed out as I experimented with placing my hand around his base and squeezing gently. I began to suck, and he bucked again, weaving his fingers through my hair and tugging slightly, as if trying to hold on. “If you don’t stop, this is going to end very messily.”

I didn’t stop.

He neared his release, taking control and thrusting a little quicker each time I sucked. I could tell he was restraining himself a bit, which I appreciated having never done this.

“Fuck,” he shouted as he spilled into me. I swallowed him down, pleased with myself that I had given him pleasure, even if I decided that this was not my favorite thing to do with him. My jaw ached a little, and the taste was...different. But his shuddering pleasure was worth it as he pulled me down onto him, crushing my mouth to his, totally heedless of where they had both been. The taste of us mingled into something heady and new, and warmth coiled through me again as he rolled me onto my back and collapsed atop me.

“Please tell me you didn’t learn that from someone else,” he growled into my shoulder as he pressed gentle kisses to my collarbone. I laughed, reaching up to stroke his hair.

“No one,” I confirmed. “Just a fast learner, I guess.”

“Hmm,” he replied, murmuring against my neck. “Or you have an excellent teacher.”

We forced ourselves out of bed when Herne came knocking, threatening to break down the door if we didn’t come out on our own.

Cerridwen was already out for the day. She and Herne it seemed both served as part of the royal guard, and even though they were not on active duty, they had to report daily to run drills and file paperwork.

“Who knew so much of soldiering was paperwork,” I said, as Carnon and I wandered down the high street toward the market where he thought I might be able to find supplies for my spellcasting. While I hadn’t given up hope of trying to contact Mama through a witch mirror, I knew my chances of finding one were slim. At the very least I could maybe scry for her, to see where she was and hopefully know she was safe. Divination magic was tricky at the best of times, but I had to do something.

“It’s not a glamorous lifestyle,” Carnon confirmed, squeezing my hand in his. He insisted on keeping me close, lest I get distracted and run off. I

rolled my eyes at this, but I privately enjoyed the warm press of his palm against mine.

Akela had stayed behind with Herne only after Carnon commanded it. “A giant wolf plodding after us will upset all the stalls,” he argued, patting Akela’s head as he whined in protest. “You’re too big for such small spaces, my friend.” Akela had huffed, giving my hip a nudge with his wet nose until I scratched his ear, then let us go with a final look of abandonment. I had to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing at his big puppy dog eyes.

Artemis had been nowhere when I looked at the window ledges, but Carnon didn’t seem worried. “She knows her way around, Red,” he said, exasperatedly. “It’s you I’m afraid of losing.”

Carnon took me to the market square, which was apparently just one of several places in the city to shop. There was an herbalist and an apothecary, which seemed promising for spellcraft, and an antique vendor and a seller of curiosities, who Carnon warned me would swindle me if given half the chance.

“Oh,” I said, frowning as I looked up at him. “I just realized I don’t have money. I can repay you...”

“Relax, Red,” he said, brushing his lips over my cheek and flipping my copper braid off of my shoulder. His voice took on a purring quality as he added, “I’m sure I can come up with a creative way for you to pay me back.” I flushed, cursing my stupid heart as it pounded a little erratically at his words.

“Okay, then,” I said, “let’s try the herbalist first.”

I dragged Carnon from shop to shop, haggling over the prices of herbs and flowers in what I hoped was an expert way. The gold that Carnon used seemed to be worth roughly the same as witch gold, and I was able to convince the vendors to lower their prices a great deal by telling them exactly where I could go to find what I was looking for if they didn’t.

Carnon looked grudgingly impressed as I filled a pack with herbs and oils and small vials of crushed gems from the apothecary. My soul began to settle with the addition of each useful item in my arsenal.

The curiosity seller didn’t have anything particularly useful, but the antique vendor had a silver athamé, tarnished from years of neglect. I ran my thumb over the handle, finding the sign of the triple moon carved within.

“How much?” I asked the seller. Carnon raised his brows, but didn’t argue when I asked him to hand over two silvers.

“I could get you a much better dagger than this, Red,” Carnon said, examining the athamé as I tried not to look too pleased with the purchase, lest the vendor charge us more.

“It’s not a dagger,” I said, stroking the blade reverently. “It’s a silver athamé. A ceremonial witch blade.” Carnon’s brows climbed even higher at this pronouncement, and I laughed.

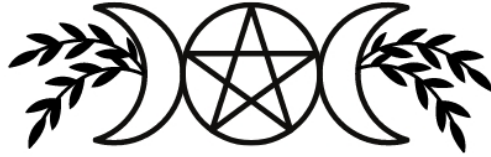
“I wonder how it ended up here?” he asked, turning the witch blade over in his hands. “What’s it for?”

“Lots of things,” I said, taking the blade and rolling it up in the scrap of leather it had come wrapped in. “Usually to draw a sacred circle, or channel fire. Sometimes to cut specific herbs for a spell.”

“So, not for attacking a quarrelsome lover?” he joked. I tsked.

“No blood magic, remember?” I asked, rising on my toes to kiss his cheek. “And if I were to stab you, I’d do it with a properly sharp blade.”

He laughed. “I just bet you would, Red.”



Chapter 27

As predicted, we hadn't found anything even close to a witch mirror, but I hoped I could use what I had found to cast some kind of scrying or divination spell. I racked my brain as we walked back to Cerridwen and Herne's home, trying to remember all of the spells I could that might be remotely useful. Most required rune stones, or cards, but a few could be done with mirrors. Maybe I could improvise a little to make this work.

"So, what's the plan, Red?" Carnon asked, his arm around my shoulders as he led me back to the house.

"I think I'm going to cast a scrying spell," I said, chewing on my bottom lip. "If Cerridwen has a small hand mirror, I should be able to at least see *where* my mother is."

"Will you wait for me?" he asked, stopping at Cerridwen's door and tilting my chin up to meet his gaze.

"Where are you going?" I asked, frowning at him.

He gave me a grim smile. "I need to make us an appointment with the king," he said, making my stomach plummet a little. "And it's been too long since I checked in. But I'll be back tonight." He bent and brushed a kiss across my cheek. "Don't cast the spell without me?"

"Alright," I said, still frowning.

"And don't leave this house," he added as an afterthought.

My frown deepened. "What am I supposed to do all afternoon by myself?" I shouted, as he started off back toward the street.

He threw me a wink. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

As it happened, Cerridwen had thought of something herself to keep me busy.

"I am really not the right person to help you with this," I said, eyeing the apron with apprehension. "My last pie was disastrous."

“All the more reason to practice,” Cerridwen said brightly. She hadn’t bothered with the glamour today, and I was almost used to the horns and wings. I had to make sure to give her space to navigate the tiny kitchen, but eventually we established a rhythm, with me rolling out the crust and Cerridwen chopping fruit for the filling.

When Carnon returned two hours later, we were laughing over the pie, which was perfectly cooked, but looked like a small child had rolled the dough.

“Baking is not really my strong suit,” I said by way of explanation when Carnon raised his brow at us. My apron was covered in flour while Cerridwen’s was pristine, and I must have looked ridiculous with the misshapen blob of a pie.

“Tastes fine,” Cerridwen said, chewing on the massive forkful she had taken from the pie’s center. “That’s all that really matters.”

“You’re a barbarian,” Carnon said, looking aghast at the hole in the middle of the pie, which I added to by taking my own bite. He turned his horror on me, and Cerridwen shrugged, taking another bite.

“I don’t see why I should stand on ceremony in my own kitchen,” she said, raising a brow at Carnon and giving him a pointed look as she held out a fork. “The middle is the best part. Go on.” Carnon took a bite, much more delicately than Cerridwen and I had.

“Pretty good,” he said over a mouthful of pie. “Even if you are barbarians.” I laughed, and Cerridwen joined me. It was nice having another woman to talk to after so long alone with Carnon. I missed Vera, but Cerridwen was a soothing presence, and I liked her.

“Let’s see this witch magic then,” Cerridwen said, clearing the pie from the table. “Elara promised me that I could watch too.”

“I doubt it will be all that exciting,” I said, fishing the chalk out of the pouch of supplies that Carnon had given me at Beltane.

“Tell me what you’re doing,” Cerridwen said excitedly, sitting to watch me from the other side of the table.

“First, you draw a pentagram to focus the elements,” I said, carefully drawing a pentagram on the wooden table with the chalk. I decided to seal it in a circle, just in case the magic tried to run amok.

“Why the circle?” Carnon asked, looking equally as interested as Cerridwen as I drew a circle clockwise around the star.

“The circle keeps the magic contained,” I said, retracing the circle counterclockwise to seal it, and placing an unlit candle at each point of the pentagram within. “And the candles call on the five elements. Normally these would be different colors, but Cerridwen only had white, so I’m hoping for the best.”

“Five elements?” Cerridwen asked. I nodded.

“Earth, fire, water, air, and spirit,” I said, pointing to each candle in turn.

Cerridwen had loaned me a small hand mirror, and I placed it in the center of the circled pentagram, surrounding it with a few bay leaves, cloves, and a sprig of eyebright.

“These herbs are in most divination spells,” I said. “Since I’m improvising a little, I thought it best to hedge my bets.”

“I’m not sure improvising with magic is a great idea, Red,” Carnon said, warily.

I gave him an impatient look. “I promise I know what I’m doing,” I said, returning to the uncast spell. “Mostly.”

“That is not comforting,” Carnon said as I added the crystal he had given me and the athamé I had found to the circle. I needed all the help I could get from the Goddess if I was going to pull this off.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m going to cast the invocation, and, if this works, I should be able to see my mother in the mirror.”

Cerridwen and Carnon both took a step back, and I gave them a withering look as I returned to the spell. I decided a quick prayer couldn’t hurt, so I bowed my head and repeated the words I had been taught all through childhood to bring the Goddess to me.

*“In the name of the Lady of the Moon,
Blessed be this place, and this time,
and they who are now with us.”*

“You missed a bit,” Cerridwen said loudly. I looked up, startled.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “This is the prayer to the Goddess.”

“But it’s not complete,” Cerridwen said. Carnon tried to shush her, without success. “You missed the part about the Horned God, Lord of Resurrection and Death.”

“I never learned that part,” I said, frowning. “But this should work anyway.”

“Witches don’t worship the Horned God?” Cerridwen asked in surprise.

“Later,” Carnon said, shooting her an annoyed glare. “Watch.”

I lit the candles with a wave of my hand, making Cerridwen’s eyes widen in wonder. With a smirk, I spoke the invocation, focusing on Mama’s face in my mind’s eye, and waiting with baited breath for her to appear in the mirror.

Nothing happened. I blew out the breath I had been holding, disappointed and frustrated.

“Is that it?” Cerridwen asked.

“No,” I said, gritting my teeth. “It didn’t work.”

“I told you, the prayer is wrong,” Cerridwen said, crossing her arms and looking superior. “You’re in the Darklands now, my witchy friend. You have to pray to the right gods.”

I scowled at her, trying the spell again with the same result. After the third failed attempt, Carnon stopped me with a gentle hand to my arm.

“Would it hurt to try what Cerridwen is suggesting, Red?” he asked, gesturing to the makeshift altar that was currently devoid of magic. “What do you have to lose?”

“Fine,” I said, sighing and blowing out the candles to start over. “Tell me how your version goes.”

Cerridwen repeated the prayer, this time with three additional lines I had never heard before. She repeated it a few times until I had it memorized. The words were strange, and held no meaning for me, but I repeated them in my mind as I turned back to my altar and took a deep breath.

*“In the name of the Lady of the Moon,
And the Lord of Death and Resurrection.
In the name of the Mighty Ones of the Four Quarters,
The Kings of the Elements.
Blessed be this place, and this time,
And they who are now with us.”*

This time, the candles flared to life on their own, and Cerridwen shot me a smug gaze before we all turned our attention to the mirror. I said the words of invocation again, picturing Mama as clearly as I could. The surface of the mirror turned cloudy.

“Mama,” I called, hoping she could somehow hear me through the mirror. Her face appeared, and I gasped. She looked older and more haggard than when I had left, her eyes and cheekbones sunken and her copper hair greasy and unkempt.

“No,” I whispered, leaning closer to the surface of the mirror to try to make out where she was. It was impossible to tell. There was only blackness around her, and though she was awake, she wasn’t moving or speaking. It was like looking at a still image across a great distance, and I shouted a few more times before Carnon put his hand over mine.

“Elara,” he said gently. “She can’t hear you.”

“She’s hurt,” I said, voice cracking on a near sob. “Or sick. She didn’t look like this a week ago.”

“I know,” Carnon said, putting a steadying hand on my hip. “And I promise we will find her. But you need to dispel the magic now, in case your grandmother senses it.”

I nodded, knowing he was right, and taking a final long look at my mother before whispering, “The spell is cast.”

The image disappeared and the candles snuffed out at once, leaving the circle empty of magic once more. The mirror shattered, the cost of the magic that allowed me to see her.

“Who is her grandmother?” asked Herne, who had been watching from the doorway. His horns looked particularly sharp in this light, and his eyes were gazing hard at me.

Carnon scrubbed his hand over his face. “Shit.”

“What?” Cerridwen asked, looking between me and Carnon. “Who is she?” I swallowed, looking at Carnon, who looked back with resigned dismay.

“The Crone is Elara’s grandmother,” Carnon said, turning to Herne and stepping in front of me in a semi-defensive posture. Herne’s face turned red as he began to splutter in anger and shock.

“She’s what?” he growled, taking a step toward us. Akela, who had been absent throughout the baking and spellcasting, must have sensed trouble. He prowled toward Herne from the living room, growling faintly as if to warn him to back down.

“I can explain,” Carnon said calmly, putting up two hands as if to prevent Herne from stepping closer.

“You brought the Crone’s granddaughter here?” Herne growled. “To my house. Where my mate lives.”

“She can’t get past the shields that surround the Bloodwood,” Carnon said, his gaze turning into something sharp and icy. It must have been a trick of the light, because he seemed to grow more broad and menacing as he stared down Herne in front of me. “And I would never put Cerridwen in danger.”

Herne growled again, and I felt that tiny stab of jealousy over whatever lay in the past between Carnon and Cerridwen, despite his assurances that there was nothing, before she stepped between all of us.

“For the sake of the Goddess, my love, calm yourself,” she said to Herne, putting a delicate hand on his arm. It seemed to make him deflate a bit, and he pulled her close to him protectively.

“I want her out of here,” he growled, pointing at me.

“We’ll be going first thing in the morning,” Carnon said calmly, reaching back to give my hand a reassuring squeeze.

“No, Carnon,” Herne growled. “Now. I want her out of my house. I want her away from my mate. You take her and put her under the watch of the king’s guard tonight. Or so help me...”

“What?” Carnon shouted, his own anger staining his neck a shade of pink that climbed up his face. “What will you do to me, Herne?”

Tension seemed to fill the tiny space as Carnon and Herne glowered at each other. Cerridwen shot me an apologetic grimace.

“Males,” she mouthed with a roll of her eyes.

“Take her,” Herne said slowly, “or I will make sure the Lords find out before you’ve had time to spin this.”

Carnon seemed to blanch a little, and I frowned, not understanding the threat.

“Fine,” Carnon bit out. “Go get our things, Elara.”

I didn’t argue, sliding past the men who were locked in what seemed to be a battle of wills as Akela, still growling, escorted me up the stairs. A suspicion had begun to gnaw away at me, and I chewed it over as I packed up our things.

I really hoped I was wrong. Goddess above, I hoped I was wrong. But part of me knew I wasn’t. I may be naive and sheltered, but I wasn’t a complete idiot.

"I'm sorry, Red," Carnon said behind me, and I jumped, pushing my suspicion as far down as I could to examine later. I turned to see him leaning on the door frame, looking at me seriously. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's fine," I said, plastering on what I hoped was a semi-convincing smile. "And you don't have to apologize."

"I do," he said, frowning at me. "I just outed you and put you in danger."

"Will Herne do something about it?" I asked. Carnon pursed his lips.

"Not if we do as he asked," he said with a sigh. "I'm sorry. I know you're not a threat, but when mates are concerned, demon males are prone to be...overprotective."

"Males?" I asked, handing Carnon the packs and pulling on my boots. "Cerridwen used that term, too. Do you mean men?" Carnon shook his head.

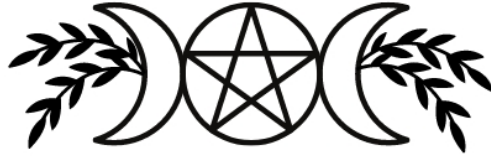
"Male demons are not like human men, Red." He said, still looking at me seriously. "They're more like animals when their homes or loved ones are threatened. 'Males' is the correct term, and 'females' rather than women is also most correct when referring to demons. Ready?"

I nodded, standing to follow him. He stopped me at the door, leaning down to brush a gentle kiss against my lips.

"I really am sorry," he whispered. "I thought we'd have more time here."

I looked up at him, that suspicion in me solidifying into a chunk of glass in my gut. "What now?" I asked, trying to keep the feeling from showing on my face.

"Now," Carnon said with a sigh, "I take you to the Demon King."



Chapter 28

“This doesn’t seem appropriate,” I hissed as Carnon knocked on a small stone side door that led, he claimed, into the palace kitchens.

We had left Herne and Cerridwen’s house on foot as night fell, Carnon insisting we both keep ourselves covered by our cloaks. The palace, made entirely of moonstone, glowed softly in the night as we neared, its lovely, delicate spires seeming to touch the stars as we grew closer. Rather than walk through the heavily guarded silver gates of the palace like normal people would do, we had gone around the back, Carnon insisting we scale a wall rather than just announce ourselves to the guards.

“If you work for the Demon King,” I hissed, irritation rising as Carnon heaved me up and over the wall, “then why is this necessary?” It was only about a ten foot climb, but I was clearly not strong in that department.

“Because,” Carnon said, breathing a little more heavily than normal, which only added to my irritation, “I want to make sure we arrive on good terms. No one appreciates being blindsided in the night.”

I rolled my eyes at this obvious lie as he jumped down the wall. Akela had already sprung over to my surprise, acting like a ten foot jump was nothing, and both waited for me at the bottom.

“Come on, Red,” Carnon whispered. “I promise I’ll catch you.” Saying a little prayer to the Goddess and wishing I had time to cast a levitation spell, I dropped, landing squarely in Carnon’s arms. He grunted a little at my weight, and I scowled.

“Dainty as a feather,” he joked, setting me on my feet. Akela gave me a friendly nose bump on the hip, then scampered off around the castle.

“Where is he going?” I hissed, feeling more vulnerable without the wolf for protection.

“Probably off hunting,” Carnon said without concern. “Or to find Artemis. He’ll be fine.” He took my hand and pulled me after him, setting a

swift pace for the little stone door, in front of which we now stood.

"I don't think anyone is coming," I said quietly, crossing my arms in annoyance.

"Just be patient, Red," Carnon said, as a sound on the other side of the door told me that he had been correct. "See?" he added smugly.

"Hello?" asked a deep voice on the other side of the door. It was opened by what appeared to be a demon male, similar in build and appearance to Herne. He had short horns that curled up from his temples and eyes with snake-like slits that gleamed yellow in the light of a single lamp he held. I noticed the gleam of scales on his neck and shivered a little. He frowned when he saw Carnon, and then frowned even more when he saw me. "Oh, it's you."

"There's been a change of plans, Lucifer," Carnon said, by way of greeting. "Can we come in?"

"Of course, my Lord," he said stiffly, offering a little bow. "This is the lady then, I presume?"

"I'm no lady," I said, feeling a flush creep up my cheeks. "Just Elara."

"Well, Lady Elara," the demon named Lucifer said, ignoring me completely, "welcome. I did not expect to receive you this late."

"Elara, this is Lucifer, head of the staff here in the palace," Carnon said, gesturing to the male who stood stiffly as if at attention. "And the right hand man of His Majesty."

"Doer of His Majesty's dirty work, you mean," Lucifer grumbled, crossing his broad arms over his chest so that muscles bunched beneath his shirt. I was surprised the head of staff was dressed so casually without royal livery or coat or anything to indicate his position, but I supposed it was late.

"Pleased to meet you," I said, hesitating a little as I held out a hand. Carnon took it, rather than letting me shake the demon's hand.

"Is there a guest room ready?" he asked, lifting my hand to his lips and dropping a kiss on the knuckles. Lucifer looked to be just as surprised as I was by the casual affection, raising a bushy blonde brow at Carnon.

"No," Lucifer said simply. "You told me tomorrow, so I planned for that tomorrow." Carnon took a breath, possibly to manage his rising frustration with this wall of a male, who seemed to be an uncompromising manager of the staff.

“Then can you get one ready?” he asked through gritted teeth. “As you see, we are early.”

“*Your* room is ready, as always, my Lord,” Lucifer said, smirking a little and seeming to enjoy Carnon’s frustration. “Take her there, if you need her to have a room tonight. The staff already has the night off.”

“Fine,” Carnon growled. “Thank you so much for your help, Lucifer.”

“Always a pleasure,” the demon replied with a chuckle, raising an arm to show us out of the kitchen. He didn’t follow us, seeming to trust that Carnon knew where he was going.

“He doesn’t like you that much, does he?” I asked, as Carnon led me through a series of faintly glowing moonstone passageways that must be used by servants or other staff, for they weren’t grand enough to be part of the palace proper.

“He likes me fine,” Carnon growled, sounding irritated. “He just likes to be an ass more.” I huffed a laugh, and Carnon looked back at me with a warm smile.

“These are servant passages,” he said, confirming my initial impression. “I can show you the palace properly tomorrow when you are expected, but for tonight we need to be discreet.”

“Would the Demon King really be offended by my presence a day early?” I asked, trying to tease out the truth from him. If my suspicions were true, he was doing a stellar job of lying through his teeth to me.

“It’s more that he likes to seem in control,” Carnon said, not looking back at me. “I wouldn’t want to threaten that.”

I rolled my eyes, noting his clever use of words. He probably *wasn't* lying to me outright, but he had a silver tongue when it came to obfuscation.

He led me up several flights of moonstone steps that must wind around the towers of the palace, finally emerging near a wooden door that looked far too plain to be in an important part of the palace. He opened it into blackness

“Where are we?” I whispered, trying to see past the door.

“Upper hallway,” Carnon murmured, pushing the blackness aside. It was a tapestry covering the door, and he held it aside for me like a curtain so I could pass. I gasped. The hallway was also moonstone, like the rest of the palace, but it glowed a much brighter white with the addition of lamps on the walls that flickered prettily against the luminescent stone. There was

a plush, midnight blue carpet that extended the length of the hall and several windows that looked directly down onto the city. I went to one, craning my whole upper body through the opening to try to get a better view.

“Careful, Red,” Carnon chuckled, putting his arm around my waist. “If you fall from up here, I won’t be able to catch you.” He pulled me back in a little, and I admired the delicate carving of the moonstone window ledges, built so you could sit and look out over the city. I made a mental note to come back here when I could.

“Where is your room?” I asked, turning in his arms so we were chest to chest. He sucked in a breath, taking a step back from me, and I frowned. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said, clearing his throat. “You just look...I didn’t...” he cleared his throat again, hesitated, then stepped toward me and enveloped me in a searing kiss. “The moonstone makes you glow,” he murmured when he finally broke away.

“Oh,” I breathed.

“Oh,” he agreed huskily, sweeping a thumb over my cheek. “Gods I was so wrong when I called you ‘fine-looking.’ You are positively radiant, Elara.”

I blushed a little at the compliment, giving him a shy smile. “Thank you,” I said. “Your room?”

Carnon cleared his throat a third time and took my hand, leading me to the end of the hallway. There were no paintings on the wall without windows, and it looked a little bare, like there used to be something there. Other than the tapestry, which was an image of a midnight sky with tiny silver stars, the hallway was empty save for a set of double doors at the end.

“You have your own hallway?” I asked, turning to Carnon with raised brows, suspicions further solidifying. He shrugged like it was nothing.

“I told you, I’m fabulously wealthy and important,” he said, grinning as he stopped before the doors. They also appeared to be carved from moonstone, with images of animals and plants engraved on their surface. Before I could get a proper look, Carnon pushed the doors open, propelling me inside.

“If this is your room,” I said, taking a step inside and feeling my stomach drop in a mixture of awe and panic, “then I wonder what the

Demon King's rooms must be like."

The room was huge, the white moonstone gleaming a little more dimly than it had in the hallway. The furniture was elegant and plush, tones of navy blue and onyx, and everything appeared to be carved from obsidian or black wood. One wall was open, shaded with sheer curtains that billowed in the cool evening breeze, and led to an open balcony that overlooked the opposite side of the city and the sparkling river below. Another door led to what I presumed was a bathing chamber, and plush couches and pillows made up a little lounge area by a fireplace, which was burning gently to ward off the cool of the evening.

Carnon chuckled, moving to the couches and dropping our bags unceremoniously on one of them. He didn't comment on what I had said, which made my stomach drop further.

"Is it normal for a human to be so favored by the Demon King?" I asked, hoping to press him into revealing something while also hoping my suspicions might be wrong. He didn't take the bait.

"The bathing room is there," he said, pointing to the doors. "And in the winter, the palace is spelled against the cold from the open windows. It should be pleasant enough this time of year."

"Carnon," I said, turning to him. "Who are you?" I prayed that he would tell me the truth, but again, I was disappointed. He strode toward me, pulling me to him in a desperate kiss.

"I promise, Elara, I'll tell you," he rumbled, pulling back after a moment. "But let me have one more night."

"I'm not an idiot, Carnon," I said, feeling anger rising inside me. "I know that you can't be some normal human lord the Demon King has favored."

"I'm not," he agreed, gazing at me seriously and brushing a whisper of a kiss over my lips. "One more night, Red. The night we would have had if we had stayed at Herne's."

I pursed my lips, trying to decide if I should agree.

"Give me one more night," he pleaded, dropping his forehead to mine, "Where I am just Carnon, and you are just Elara, and we can just be whatever this is." He sounded so desperate and hopeful that I found myself nodding to this request.

"I'm hungry," I said quietly, breaking the tense silence that had fallen between us.

“I’ll go get us something,” he said, brushing a kiss to my temple. “Feel free to bathe or change or whatever you want. I’ll be back shortly.”

I watched him walk out the doors, feeling my stomach knot with anxiety. I had promised him one more night, but I had lied. Before guilt could take root, I reminded myself that he had been lying for days. For our entire time together, really. I had given him all of myself, and he had given me scraps surrounded by lies. Sighing, I bit down on my lip and fought back the tears as I gathered my chalk and herbs, and got to work.

When Carnon returned with food, I was in the tub. I had laid my plan, I just had to decide if I was ready to pay the cost of the magic I would have to use. Truth magic demanded a truth in return, and the one I knew the magic would require to keep the balance was one I had only just started to recognize myself. I couldn’t decide if knowing Carnon’s truth a day early was worth telling him mine.

But would it be a day? Or would it be weeks of Carnon refusing to answer my questions and skirting around the truth? I sighed, tipping my head back on the lip of the huge, onyx tub. I had filled it with hot water and something that made bubbles and smelled like lavender, in an attempt to prepare and calm myself for what I was about to do.

“This is a sight I don’t mind at all,” Carnon said, leaning on the doorframe of the bathing chamber. He couldn’t really see anything through the bubbles, but I allowed myself a blush anyway. “Do you need any help?”

I laughed. “I’m sure you’re offering to help me out of the kindness of your heart,” I teased, tilting my head back farther to look at him. “And not out of any kind of personal motive.”

“Of course,” he replied, smiling smugly. “I’m all about charity.”

He rolled up his sleeves and selected a little bottle from a small shelf, moving to kneel by the tub.

“May I?” he asked, pouring some of the liquid from the bottle into his hand and gesturing to my hair. I nodded, leaning forward as he wove his strong fingers between the strands, massaging my scalp in a way that had

me sighing very suggestively. He chuckled, tilting my head back to rinse my hair.

The shampoo he had used smelled like jasmine, and I smiled a little as my heart simultaneously cracked. He told me I had smelled like jasmine to him. How much of this had been true, and how much had been lies? I hated that I had to question every damn word out of his mouth, and it steeled my resolve to get answers tonight.

“Gods, Elara,” he said a little huskily, letting a hand trail over my shoulder in the soapy water. “Seeing you like this in my tub is giving me all kinds of inappropriate ideas.” He bent forward, kissing the other shoulder that was visible just above the water.

“What kinds of inappropriate ideas?” I teased, giving him the most sultry look I could muster. I have no idea if I did it right, because he laughed.

“Food first,” he said, standing and retrieving a fluffy towel from a pile next to the tub. “Will you come out?”

I stood, letting the soapy water spill down my body as he watched a little slack jawed. Again, I wavered as I asked myself if I really wanted to do this. When Carnon looked at me, I felt radiant, like he had said. Even if it was a lie, did I want that to stop?

“Goddess above,” he growled, eyes going molten and steely at the same time. “Get into this towel or the food will be cold when I’m done with you.” I laughed, stepping out of the tub and letting him wrap me in the towel. He dried me like I was something precious and fragile. I felt a little precious and fragile with him, and now...I knew I would miss that.

“I just realized I don’t really have anything to wear,” I said, frowning as I left the bathing chamber still wrapped in a towel. Other than my travel worn clothes and the cleaner ones Carnon had procured in Mithloria, I had nothing. Not even a nightgown. “Nothing appropriate for meeting a king, at least.”

“I’ll see if I can find something in storage,” he said with a frown, looking down at my towel-wrapped body. “Not that I mind this view, but maybe there are some clean night clothes and other things in the servant quarters.” He leaned down, brushing a soft kiss against my lips and groaning a little. “For now, you can borrow one of my shirts if you insist on covering this breathtaking view.”

I laughed as he released me, producing a white shirt from a drawer in the elegant armoire. It was loose and buttonless, with ties at the neck, and I tossed it over my head as he watched me intently, perched on the back of a couch. It came down to my mid thigh, and I turned in a little spin.

“Will this do to meet the king?” I asked, feeling warmth flood me as he laughed. I wondered if he would still laugh so easily after tonight.

“I don’t think I want anyone to meet you wearing only this,” he said as I went to him, stopping to stand between his legs. He dropped his hands to my hips, brushing my wet hair behind my shoulder. He groaned, pressing against me until I could feel exactly what he wanted to do. “We should eat. Now. Quickly.”

I laughed again as he released me and took a seat on the couch. A few dishes had been placed on the little table, and I saw a few things I recognized and a few I didn’t. There was some kind of fish in a delicious buttery sauce, a rice dish cooked with scallions and seasoned with pepper, and more mango mixed with some other fruits. Staying here would not be all bad, if the food was any indicator.

“What’s this?” I asked, pointing to a little plate of round pastry-like confections. It looked a little like a cookie, but lighter, with something creamy in between the two halves.

“It’s called a macaron,” Carnon said, raising a brow at me. “It’s a dessert. You’ve never had one?”

“No,” I said, frowning as I picked up the cookie-pastry thing. I bit into it tentatively, feeling the pastry crackle then melt in my mouth. The cream was sweet, but not too sweet, and it tasted floral. Maybe roses? I moaned.

“I take it you like them?” Carnon asked with a grin, watching me as I consumed the macaron and made a wholly indecent noise.

“Goddess, yes,” I said, licking a little of the cream off the tip of a finger. Carnon’s gaze heated at the move, and I blushed. “Sorry.”

“Never apologize for enjoying something, Red,” Carnon said, moving to sit next to me and bending in for a kiss. He licked the corner of my lips, where some of the cream or pastry must have remained. “Or for being irresistible.”

He kissed me, and I let him seduce me, despite knowing what I was about to do. His kisses were intoxicating, and I let myself fall into the pleasure I knew he could offer me. He moved down my throat, kissing the place where his shirt parted over my bosom.

“Let me take you to bed,” he growled, a little breathlessly. “To my bed.”

“We already did that once,” I gasped as he curved his hands over my backside and squeezed gently. I wasn’t wearing any undergarments, and I could feel the heat he was already building in me curl low and delicious.

“Not this bed,” he replied, trailing kisses over my shoulder as he pulled the shirt aside a little. “Gods, I want you on every surface in this room.”

“Then take me,” I breathed, setting my plan into motion.

He growled, lifting me in a single move and striding purposefully toward the bed, dropping me in its center. It was a huge, four poster thing with velvet covers and silken sheets, and I shivered a little as the soft material kissed my skin.

“Take off your clothes,” I said, making Carnon stop in his tracks as he prowled toward me.

“Are you taking charge tonight, Red?” he asked, the bulge in his trousers seeming to strain to break loose. I smirked.

“Yes,” I said coyly. “Is that a problem?”

“Not even a tiny bit,” he said, pulling his shirt over his head and unlacing the straining fabric at his groin. He sprang free, and my mouth felt a little dry, knowing that this could be the last time for us. He might not forgive me for wresting his truth out of him, and I might not forgive him for whatever he was about to reveal.

“On the bed,” I said, pulling off the shirt he had loaned me and letting him see all of me. Letting him get one last really good look.

“Gods, is this what the afterlife feels like?” he asked, crawling over me to lie on his back. He propped his head on his arms and gave me a lazy smile. “Because I could get used to it.”

“I was thinking,” I said, climbing over him and straddling his hips, “of trying something a little different tonight.” I bent low, brushing my lips over his and my breasts across his chest. He pressed against me, and I steeled myself, quickly whispering the incantation for the binding spell under my breath. The candles I had hidden strategically around the room burst into flame as I finished the incantation, and I quickly pulled the athamé from beneath the mattress to cut a lock of my hair, the price for the magic.

“What are you doing, Red?” Carnon asked, less panicked than I thought he might be, and more interested in this new development. He wriggled his hips a bit, clearly trying to move from the protective circle I had chalked beneath the bed while he had been getting us dinner. “If you’re into bondage, Red, it’s a lot more fun with ropes.”

“I’ll pass,” I said, humor gone from me as I concentrated on what I had to do next, repeating the incantation for truth three times before finishing with, “The spell is cast.” Carnon frowned as the candles went out, and I sighed, finally letting a single tear fall from my eyes as I looked down at him beneath me. I pulled the shirt back on, feeling the need for some kind of armor while I did this, and realization lit his face.

“You promised me one more night, Elara,” he growled, struggling in greater earnest now. As long as he remained in the circle, his truth would be revealed after I paid with mine. It’s why I’d had to bind him first.

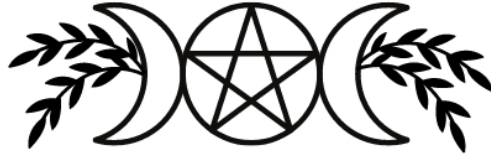
“I’m sorry,” I said, my heart breaking a little that he still didn’t confess, even though I was giving him the time to do it. “I lied. You’re not a stranger to that concept.”

“This is not how I wanted you to learn the truth,” he said, growling a little more desperately as he tried to free himself beneath me.

“You’ve had plenty of time to tell me,” I snapped, patience gone as my heart gave a mighty crack. “You knew I was falling in love with you, and you lied anyway.” He stilled, my truth already working to pay the price of the magic I had cast.

He changed, sharply curved black horns appearing from his temples and the emerald glint of his eyes brightening as his pupils stretched to resemble the slits of a snake. His ears pointed, and his canines sharpened a little like Cerridwen’s and Herne’s, but no wings or tail made an appearance. His skin began to give off an ethereal, golden glow, turning more tan and shining strangely bright in the dark of the room. Intricate tattoos appeared, snaking across his chest and down his arms and torso. They looked like some sort of script, but I couldn’t make out any of the words. A separate tattoo appeared over his heart; a circle with a crescent moon on top pointing upwards like a pair of horns.

He was beautiful and terrifying at the same time, and I scrambled back, scooting to the end of the bed as I stared at the naked, bound form of the Demon King.



Chapter 29

“How long have you known?” he asked, face betraying nothing about his emotions. I had expected fury or embarrassment from him, not this cool amusement. It annoyed me and broke my heart a little more. Clearly, he didn’t care.

“I suspected in Asterra,” I said, crossing my arms and shivering slightly, fighting back the tears that were threatening to spill from me in a flood. “I was sure after the fight with Herne. Why did you lie to me?”

Carnon, the Demon King, sighed, closing his eyes for a moment.

“I’m at a real disadvantage here, Red,” he said, opening his eyes to glance at his naked body. “If you would please unbind me, we can have a civil conversation about this.”

“No,” I snapped, my voice breaking a little. “No more chances for you to lie or hide or equivocate. I want the full truth, and you’ll be bare for it, like I was.”

He winced, looking at me with something like longing and remorse. I hardened my heart.

“Let’s talk about your truth, Red,” he said softly. “I know I’ve hurt you.”

“Yes,” I said. “You had a thousand chances to be honest, and you continued to lie.”

“Technically, I never lied to you,” he said, raising a brow as if hoping to amuse me. I narrowed my eyes into the fiercest glare I could muster, and he sighed. “Fine, I certainly skirted the truth. And I’m sorry. Will you please unbind me so we can talk about this properly?”

“No,” I repeated. “Not until you tell me why you lied.”

He sighed again, and the soft, warm part of me that had truly been falling for him threatened to overpower my anger. I pushed it down, letting fury take its place.

“I didn’t know who you were, not fully, until we left the Bloodwood,” he said, sounding tired and a little pained. “By the time you told me that you were going to the Demon King, it seemed imprudent to tell you that you’d already found him.”

“That’s a load of shit, and you know it,” I replied angrily, rising from the bed to pace around the room. “You could have told me and it wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

“It would have changed everything, Red,” he replied, his snake-like eyes glinting in the dark.

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped, feeling the sting of the nickname he had used so familiarly for so long.

“Very well, *my Lady*,” he said, somehow sounding both angry and amused. “You know it would have changed things between us.”

“What things?” I shouted. “The fact that you wanted to bed me? The fact that I wanted you to?”

“Yes,” he said, sounding sincere. “And much more. I needed you to trust me, Elara.”

“Oh, well that worked out great for you, didn’t it?” I spat, letting my sarcasm run wild. “How easy it must have been to convince the naive, sheltered little witch that you were actually helping her. Tell me, how far down on your checklist was bedding me to get me to trust you?”

“Elara, please,” he said, sounding increasingly frantic. “I will explain everything if you will just let me up.”

“No,” I repeated again. “Not unless you’re willing to swear a blood vow to it.” He pursed his lips and my heart gave another wrenching crack. He was still planning on lying to me, even now. He threw back his head, clenching his teeth in frustration.

“It’s not that simple, Elara,” he growled, as I turned away from him to surreptitiously wipe away a tear. “Gods, how do I even begin to explain this?” he asked, more to himself than to me now.

“Try,” I said, crossing my arms and waiting for his explanation. “Just do the opposite of what you’ve been doing this last week and tell me the truth.”

“Let me up, Elara,” he growled again. “Then you get your truth.”

I laughed hollowly, realizing that if he wouldn’t give in now, he probably never would.

“You lied to me too,” Carnon snapped, sounding angrier now, rather than amused by my magic. “Don’t pretend this was a one-sided offense.”

“Oh,” I said, laughing shrilly in my disbelief. “I see. So it was alright for you to lie to protect yourself, but not for me.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, cursing and breathing heavily as if still trying to break the binding spell.

“It won’t break until I break the circle,” I said, also feeling smug at this. “So you may as well stop struggling.”

“You’re changing the subject,” he said. “Would you have told me who you were if I hadn’t demanded payment for the deal?”

“Probably not,” I confessed, feeling a stab of guilt. “But you had the chance earlier.”

“And I asked for one more night,” he replied, still sounding angry. “One more night to enjoy you, to enjoy us, before we had to deal with the messiness of the truth. I was going to tell you everything tomorrow.”

“Oh well then all is forgiven,” I replied sarcastically. “Let me just climb into bed with you and you can lie to me some more,” I spat. “I’m done with this. With you. I’m leaving in the morning. I’ll take my chances on my own.”

I swiped a pillow and a blanket from the bed as he struggled to release himself. Clearly, demon magic couldn’t simply undo witch magic that easily. I felt a little smug with that knowledge.

“Elara, stop,” he said, gritting his teeth as he struggled. “This is a mistake, and I can’t explain myself magicked to the fucking bed.”

“Then you should have explained it to me when you were standing,” I replied, another tear running down my cheek. I swiped it away, angry that I was letting myself cry over this man, this male rather, who had lied to me over and over. I made myself a nest on the couch, determined to get at least a little sleep tonight.

“Please, Elara,” he sighed, clearly having given up the struggle against the spell. “I know you’re angry and I hurt you. I’m more sorry than you can possibly know. But there is so much you don’t understand yet. I’ve been trying to protect you.”

I said nothing, putting a pillow over my head to muffle out the rest of his speech. I didn’t want to hear more excuses or professions of sincerity. I wanted to be angry and hurt and let those feelings run their course. I wanted to rage at something, and I wanted to feel like that rage was vindicated.

So I lay there, finally falling asleep with the pillow still over my head and tears running down my face.

I awoke feeling puffy and congested after a night of crying. My anger had smoldered to a simmer in my gut, like a living being sleeping alongside the strange demon magic in me. My head was still under the pillow, and I took a deep, if somewhat musty, breath, trying to mentally prepare myself for the day.

I would demand a horse and money, and I would go find my own way to get by in the Darklands. Maybe I would return to find my mother or keep hunting for a witch mirror so I could get to her. Or maybe I'd hire a mercenary or something to help me. I wasn't sure. I just knew I needed to get away from Carnon.

"Contemplating doing something rash, Red?" Carnon's voice came from far closer than it should.

I started, dropping the pillow and staring at Carnon, now fully dressed in an elegant black suit, sitting across from me in a plush armchair, ankle crossed over a knee as if we were having a casual conversation. He wore no crown, but the black horns made him seem more regal and fearsome than he had in his human glamour. He was also about a thousand times more handsome, and I cursed myself for noticing.

There was a steaming pot of tea or coffee on the table, and some platters of pastries and fruit, and I realized he must have been up for some time.

"How did you break my spell?" I asked, genuinely shocked he had managed it. I felt my hair to find the too short lock I had cut the night before. Had it not been enough payment?

"Demon King, remember?" he said, sipping a cup of coffee like it was any other morning and looking completely unbothered and at ease. In the light of day I noticed that his tongue was forked like a snake, and I shuddered, remembering the feel of that tongue in places it would never go again. "Breakfast?"

I sat up, frowning at the food and at him, and rubbing my hands down my hot, probably red cheeks. “Why don’t you look more...demonic?” I asked, taking in his appearance anew. Despite the horns and the tongue, and the eyes I supposed, he didn’t look very different.

His face darkened a little as he smirked, taking a sip of coffee. “You haven’t seen my beast yet,” he muttered. I grimaced at what I believed was an innuendo, and he sighed, putting down the coffee cup and leaning forward to look at me more closely.

“I am sorry, Red,” he said, gaze boring into mine as if he could convince me of his remorse through sheer will power. His snake eyes were unsettling, but not unpleasant to look at, and I gave myself a little mental shake to make me focus. “Truly, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“Well you did,” I snapped. He flinched a little, and I didn’t have the patience to examine the fact that I had made the Demon King flinch. “And don’t call me that, *your Majesty*.”

Carnon sighed, drawing a hand over his face as if he had not been expecting a lengthy struggle with me today.

“Fine, *my Lady*,” he replied, pouring irritation into the title. I felt a little bolt of satisfaction run through me that I was succeeding in annoying him. He sat back, picking up his coffee mug again and studying me. “We need to discuss what happens next.”

“There is nothing to discuss,” I replied, sitting up a little taller in an attempt to be haughty. “You are my enemy. The enemy of all witches. And I’m leaving, end of story.”

“You are not leaving,” Carnon replied, sounding tired already. “For many reasons, but primarily because I am not your enemy. Since you have invoked the protection of the Horned God, I am honor-bound to keep you under my protection.”

My jaw dropped. How he thought he would get away with this lie was beyond me. “I did no such thing,” I argued. “I told you I would do it when I arrived, and now I will absolutely not be doing that.”

“There will be no more lies between us, Elara,” he said, raising a brow at me. “You did. Granted, you probably didn’t realize you were doing it, but you looked me in the eye and said ‘I invoke the protection of the Horned God.’ All that is required to invoke it is the words spoken in earnest to the Demon King. To me.”

“I didn’t say that,” I argued, growing frustrated.

“You did,” he replied. “When we arrived in Mithloria. Outside the Bloodwood.” I racked my brain, thinking back to that moment.

“I told you what my mother told me to say,” I replied, remembering his shocked expression when I’d told him. “I didn’t mean to invoke anything! I don’t even believe in the Horned God!”

“You should believe,” he replied calmly. “And it’s done. Protection invoked.”

“Then I un-invoke it,” I said, glaring at him as he calmly sipped his coffee. “You told me I have that power.”

“You did,” he conceded. “Before. You don’t now.”

“What do you mean I don’t now?” I asked, standing and raising my voice.

He smiled, calmly putting down his cup and standing as well. “If you won’t eat breakfast, then you should get dressed. We have a lot to do today.” I gaped, incensed by his cavalier attitude.

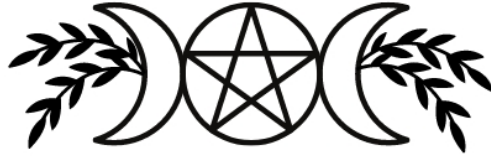
“Nothing has changed since last night,” I growled, taking a step closer. “I still hate you.”

“No, you don’t,” he said, also taking a step until we were almost touching. “Especially not if nothing has changed.” He gazed down at me steadily, and my cheeks flushed as I remembered my confession.

“That...what I said last night about my feelings for you is no longer true” I said, trying to contain my fury. “I un-invoke your protection, or whatever,” I added. “I want nothing to do with you.”

Carnon sighed, dropping his face so close to mine that I thought for a panicked second he might kiss me with that forked tongue. He didn’t, stopping a hair’s breadth from my lips.

“Then it’s a shame for you,” he replied in a deep rumble, “that I want everything to do with you.” He stepped back, making me sway a little at the loss of his presence. “Now get dressed. I really don’t want anyone other than me seeing you like that.”



Chapter 30

Carnon refused to let me leave his room, but he granted me the courtesy of not barging into the bathing chamber as I dressed. I braided my hair back and pulled on the clothes he had given me, wishing I could burn them just to spite him. When I emerged fully dressed, he looked me up and down, frowning.

“We will have to add seeing a dressmaker to the list of things to do,” he said, staring in a way that made me very self conscious. “You can’t be presented at court like that.”

“Like what?” I asked, embarrassed and annoyed. “You didn’t seem to mind my clothes before.”

“Things have changed, R—my Lady,” he said, biting off the title in frustration. I would miss him calling me ‘Red,’ but this distance between us was for the best. Seeing my anger, he smirked.

“If it makes you feel any better, what’s under the clothes is still perfection,” he purred. I made a sound of disgust and he laughed. It was so like before that it hurt a little, and his laugh died when he saw my face.

He sighed heavily. “I have to take care of a few things,” he said, moving to the armoire and strapping on his dagger, as well as sliding a black ring I hadn’t seen before onto his middle finger. “Kingly things. You’re to stay put in the castle.”

“Stay put?” I exclaimed. “Am I your prisoner, then?”

“Not at all,” he replied, striding toward me and putting his hands on my shoulders. “I told you, Elara, I am not your enemy.” He bent as if to kiss my forehead, and I jerked back, eying him warily. He sighed, pursed his lips, and let go of my arms, putting some space between us.

“I never meant to hurt you, Elara,” he said gently. “And I promise, I’ll make this right.”

“Like I should believe anything you say,” I snapped. “And what am I, if not your prisoner?”

“For now?” he asked, straightening to his full height and frowning down at me. “An honored guest. And someone under my protection.”

“Honored guests don’t have to stay put,” I pointed out, crossing my arms angrily.

“Honored guests who have a habit of stumbling into trouble do,” he argued, a faint smile lighting his face. “And you can go anywhere in the palace or grounds. The staff know you’re here.” He walked over to the doors to his room and opened them, whistling softly. Akela came into the room, his ears flat and tail drooping, looking guilty. He whined at me sadly.

“I accept your apology,” I said, crouching a little to put my arms around the wolf’s neck. He licked my shoulder apologetically, leaving a big patch of drool on the shoulder of my blouse, and I patted his head. Carnon made a pained sound.

“If all it takes to earn your forgiveness is one lick, Elara, then I beg you to let me apologize properly,” he said, voice promising sinful things. I looked up at him with a scowl, and his smirk fell away. “Not in the mood to play with me I see. That’s fine. I’ll be back soon.” He strode out of the room leaving the door open, and Akela whined again, as if requesting I please forgive his master for his pig-headedness.

“Not likely, I’m afraid,” I said, sighing. I dropped my face into Akela’s warm neck and sighed. “I wish I could speak to my mother.”

Akela barked, suddenly excited. He grabbed my sleeve and pulled me to follow.

“Fine,” I sighed. “Take me on the tour.”

The palace was lovely, and I was in no mood to enjoy it. Colonnades of moonstone held no appeal, nor did gardens of flowering hedges and tinkling, moonstone fountains. Akela dragged me through the palace, a wolf on a mission, and the staff bowed or curtsied politely whenever I passed, some smiling broadly and others whispering excitedly. I wondered what Carnon had told them about me.

After wandering for a half hour I was tired and heartsick, and I just wanted to lie down and be sad.

“Let’s go back, Akela,” I said, patting the wolf’s head. “I’m not in the mood for this.” He barked, tilting his head down a hallway we hadn’t yet

explored. When I tried to pull away and return to Carnon's room, he wouldn't let me.

"Fine, one more room, and that's it," I said, letting the wolf drag me onward.

Akela stopped outside an unremarkable door and barked, encouraging me to push it open. I expected to find another garden or a gallery or a sitting room, but instead it was something like a storage room. The objects inside were dusty and worn, and I coughed as we kicked up dust that had settled over what appeared to be centuries.

"Why are we here?" I asked Akela. He barked again, pointing his nose ahead to a dusty mirror that was leaning against the wall. I frowned.

"It's a nice thought," I said, realizing that Akela thought I could speak to my mother through the mirror. "But it has to be a witch mirror. A special mirror." Akela barked again, and I sighed, walking over to the mirror and trying to show him.

"It needs to have special runes," I said, wiping dust from the frame and pointing. "See?" Akela barked and wagged his tail slightly, sitting determinedly in front of the mirror. I sighed, looking back at the silver frame. My eyes went wide.

There, right where I had wiped away the dust, was a witch sign. I used my sleeve, which would definitely be unpresentable after this, to wipe away more of the dust.

The Demon King had a witch mirror in his palace. I scoffed, remembering our jaunt through the market in search of a witch mirror that Carnon swore up and down would not exist. Just another lie to add to the list. I examined the edges and the backing, but it seemed to be perfectly intact. It was a floor-length mirror, so I could step through it easily enough. All I needed was to cast the spell.

I looked around, waiting to see if anyone would enter the room and stop me. I made one of the most hasty—and probably reckless—plans of my life. I would go through the mirror to the cottage and look for my mother. If she was there I would bring her here to make a plan. If she wasn't, I would go to Vera in Ostara and beg for her aunt's help.

Taking a deep breath, I said the incantation, making the glass turn to liquid for traveling. A bloodcurdling scream filled the air, emanating from the mirror itself and seeming to echo all around the room. I covered my ears and Akela barked, growling at the silvery surface of the mirror.

“WHERE ARE YOU, ELARA?” boomed the ancient voice of my grandmother as the high pitched screaming continued. I covered my ears with my hands and screamed as a hand burst from the silvery surface. My grandmother’s face appeared in its depths, murky beneath the glass as if trying to push through from a great distance, and the screaming siren continued to wail in alarm as I saw her mouth my name.

“The spell is cast,” I shouted. Another scream, this time my grandmother’s, rang out. From pain or frustration, I couldn’t tell, as the glass snapped back into solid form, and her hand fell to the floor. Her severed, bleeding hand. The room went utterly silent, except for the growling of the wolf behind me and the sounds of my retching as I spilled my breakfast, the dismembered hand writhing slightly as if still searching for me.

“What in the name of all the bloody gods was that?” shouted a voice, as a body came barreling through the door to the room. A blond head and white horns greeted me, as I met Lucifer’s snakelike eyes

“You,” he growled.

“I left you for forty minutes, and you still managed to get into trouble,” Carnon said, sighing as he took a drink from a wine glass that looked a lot like Bloodberry wine. His fork tongue flicked over the edge of the glass, sending a flood of heat to my core. What in the name of the Goddess was wrong with me?

My grandmother’s severed hand lay on Carnon’s dark wooden desk, oozing slightly as it writhed. He looked down at it with distaste.

Lucifer, who clearly didn’t like me, had marched me straight to what must be Carnon’s office after finding me. The scream had apparently been heard through the entire castle, and the sight of Lucifer marching me and the bloody hand toward Carnon’s office had not helped to quiet the panic that had spread. He had plopped me down into a chair in front of Carnon’s desk, standing like a silent sentry until Carnon had finally joined us.

“Talk,” Lucifer said, after Carnon had poured his wine and sat in the leather chair behind the desk, avoiding the sight of the hand.

“You have a witch mirror,” I said accusingly, angry but not surprised that yet another secret had been kept from me. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“There is no witch mirror in this castle,” Carnon replied, frowning. I scoffed, but before I could accuse Carnon of more lies, Lucifer cut in.

“There is,” he said, his deep voice reverberating off the walls. “Your wolf led her right to it. That *thing*,” he added, nodding to the hand, “came through it.”

Carnon’s snake-like pupils widened in surprise and, I thought, a little fear as he inspected the hand more closely.

“Your grandmother’s?” he asked, glancing at me for confirmation. “She shouldn’t have been able to breach the wards.”

“Well she did,” Lucifer said, voice stony with disapproval. “And I think this one drew her here,” he added, nodding to me. Carnon frowned, taking a sip.

“Take care of it, Lucifer,” he said, waving to the hand. “That and the mirror. Double check the wards, and make sure there are no other hidden mirrors in the castle. Have every damn room searched if you have to.” The blonde demon nodded dourly and left.

“You were supposed to keep her out of trouble,” Carnon said, turning his ire on Akela, “not find it for her.”

“What is Lucifer going to do with the mirror?” I interrupted, shaken from the screaming and the voice and the hand of my grandmother coming through the glass. My stomach roiled at the memory. “And how is there a witch mirror in this castle that you don’t know about?”

“He’ll destroy it,” Carnon replied, pouring a second glass of wine and placing it in front of me. “It’s too dangerous to have a portal to the Witchlands in the palace. And I don’t know how it got here. I suppose I’ll have to investigate that.”

“And you expect me to believe you didn’t know about it?” I asked, eyeing the wine warily and folding my hands in my lap.

“No more lies, Elara, remember?” Carnon said, seriously. “I vow to only tell you the truth from now on.”

“Oh please,” I said, rolling my eyes. “That’s the most blatant lie you’ve told all day.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re extremely difficult?” he asked, a smirk playing at his mouth. They were words he had said when we had first met, and my gut clenched at the memory.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re an ass?” I replied, only vaguely aware that I was insulting the Demon King, possibly the most powerful magical being who walked the earth. I didn’t care. He could go to hell and freeze there.

“Fine,” Carnon said, smirk falling away as he growled in frustration. He stood, moving to sit on the edge of his desk in front of me, his eyes an angry swirl of green. I leaned back into my chair a bit. “Fine. I deserve that. Let’s get it all out in the open, then. Just remember, I wanted to do this slowly.”

“Do what slowly?” I asked, heart pounding a little faster at the intent look he was giving me.

“Drop my truths on you,” he replied. “Woo you. But you’ve given me little choice now. If I’m to keep you safe and keep you here, I’ll have to tell you as much as I can.”

“Woo me?” I asked, taking another fortifying sip of wine. “What are you talking about?”

“First, you can’t undo the invocation of protection. I thought you might try, once you realized who I was, so I came up with another way to keep you protected,” he said, leaning forward and tapping the shadow stone necklace.

“The reason I wanted this,” he said, brushing a thumb over the stone, “is because I recognized it. It’s been missing for years, and I couldn’t believe my luck when I found it with you in the Bloodwood. At first, I thought that’s why Akela and Artemis were drawn to you.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, mouth going a little dry. “Missing from where?”

“From here,” Carnon replied. “From this palace. For centuries, this very shadow stone necklace has been given as a gift to whomever the Demon King chose to marry.”

I blanched, realization hitting me like a blow as he continued.

“I couldn’t take it from you because it must be given freely,” he continued. “It’s part of the betrothal magic that imbues the stone. Which is why I am very interested to know how your mother came into possession of it.”

“Wait,” I said, still caught on his earlier words. “Marry? Betrothal?” He nodded.

“You agreed,” he said, sipping his wine unconcerned as my entire world exploded before me. “When you agreed to hold onto it for me. Always.”

“I did not agree to marry you,” I spluttered, staring at him in shocked horror. “You didn’t tell me that’s what this was.”

“You didn’t ask,” he said, the smirk returning as he clearly enjoyed my rising panic. “And it’s too late to undo it now, I’m afraid. For better or for worse, the magic is binding.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, voice trembling as the reality of what he was telling me started to sink in. “I will not marry you.”

“You will,” he said, sounding so self-assured I wanted to throw something at him. He pursed his lips, expression softening a little as he looked at me. “Elara...”

“No!” I shouted, standing and backing away from him toward the walls, which were lined with bookshelves. I wondered if hurling a book at his head would do any serious damage. “You cannot make me marry you.”

Carnon sighed, having the nerve to look like I had rejected a perfectly romantic proposal. He looked at me, a little wistfully.

“I would never make you. In time, you’ll agree,” he said, stepping away from the desk and coming to stand in front of me so quickly, I practically missed the movement. I looked at him in horror as he twisted the black ring in his finger, almost like Mama playing with her necklace.

“There’s another part of this that you are clearly not ready for yet,” he added, lifting a hand to cup my cheek as his other hand moved to my waist, “but I promise I will tell you when you are.”

I wanted to flinch back from him, to pull myself away, but my traitorous body leaned into his warmth as he dropped his forehead to mine.

“Elara,” he added in a reverent whisper. “Don’t you know by now that there was a reason I found you that day in the Bloodwood?” He lifted his head, looking at me with those too bright demon eyes that made me feel hot and cold at the same time.

“And what was that?” I whispered, heart racing at his touch, while my brain berated me for so easily melting into him. “You said you were hunting.”

“I thought that was obvious, Red,” he said, brushing my cheek with his thumb. He devoured me with his eyes, possessively almost, and anger and frustration and confusion coalesced into a writhing creature inside me. The

bright and shadowy magic perked up with interest as he smirked. “I was hunting for you.”



Epilogue

Carnon

Gods above, this woman was going to be the death of me. She looked so innocent and fragile to an unsuspecting bystander, but she was a firecracker. She stormed around my office when I refused to let her leave, shouting obscenities and looking so effortlessly adorable it was difficult not to laugh at her tirade.

Not that she was wrong about anything. I felt guilty about the lies, and I knew I should have told her at least some of my truths sooner. But for once in my gods-damned life, I hadn't been the Demon King or the sword of justice or the protector of my people. I hadn't been loved or feared or envied. With her, I had just been Carnon, and I had wanted that for one more fucking night.

It was stupid, not telling her. I know that now. I'd had this grand vision in my mind of how I would tell her about being the Demon King, about the betrothal, about all of it. It had involved far more moonlight and romance and far less throwing of my valuables around my office. I sighed, watching as a pen bounced off a marble bust of the first Demon King, leaving it stained with black ink.

Artemis gave me a tug in sympathy down our bond, as if reminding me that I should have listened to her and Akela. They were right, as usual, my bonded protectors. They had known who she was from the beginning.

I had been so surprised by their insistence that they had found her, after searching for years, that I hadn't even really had time to think all the lies through. And then she was with me, her head on my shoulder as she slept, her hand in mine as we traversed the wood, the scent of her everywhere. And when she confessed her lie to me, I should have told her

then as well. But I was so shocked at what it would mean for us, so panicked for my people and angry at the Goddess for that twist of fate, that I let the lie linger.

And when I was inside her, thrusting into her and feeling like I was finally home, I should have told her then. I knew I was falling in love with her from the first moment our lips touched. Hell, I knew the moment the rusalka dragged her into that river. I should have told her everything before I took her to bed and crossed that line with her. But I was selfish. I wanted to be Carnon, just Carnon, for a little longer.

Herne was right. There would be a storm coming from the Daemon Lords when they found out who she was, both to the witches and to me. My blood ran cold at the idea of those bastards or her grandmother using her to control me, as I knew they all would when they learned the truth. Despite the fact that I would die to keep her safe, there was no way I could protect her from all of that. Arming her with the truth and her strange demon magic was the best thing I could do. I didn't really give a fuck about where the magic came from, as long as she used it to defend herself.

So from now on, there would be only truth between us. And when she was ready and had found a way to forgive me, when I had earned her trust and her love, I would tell her the last part. Tell her everything. Once we had figured out how to master her unusual magic, how to navigate the politics, how to deal with her grandmother, and how to save her mother, then it could be just us again.

I had to believe, watching her freckled face grow red with anger as I refused to react to her destruction, her copper hair flying about her face like a whirlwind, that she would come around. That she would realize there was no going back for either of us. That she would come to love me as fiercely as I already loved her.

Gods, she was so beautiful and strong and full of the fire I craved. And she was mine. I had been looking for her for too long to let her go now, and I needed her. I wanted her. Even if I had to grovel for the next century, I would win her back and earn her love.

And she didn't really have much of a choice. She had already promised to be mine. Always.

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About The Author

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Madeleine Eliot loves to read and write spicy romantasy with all of the best tropes. Dubbed the “Queen of Cozy” by her readers, Madeleine enjoys writing romantasy that is all vibes and spice, with a dash of adventure and world-building. She is always working on her next book, which is probably another spicy romantasy. Follow her adventures and latest works at [instagram.com/madeleineeliotwrites](https://www.instagram.com/madeleineeliotwrites)

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